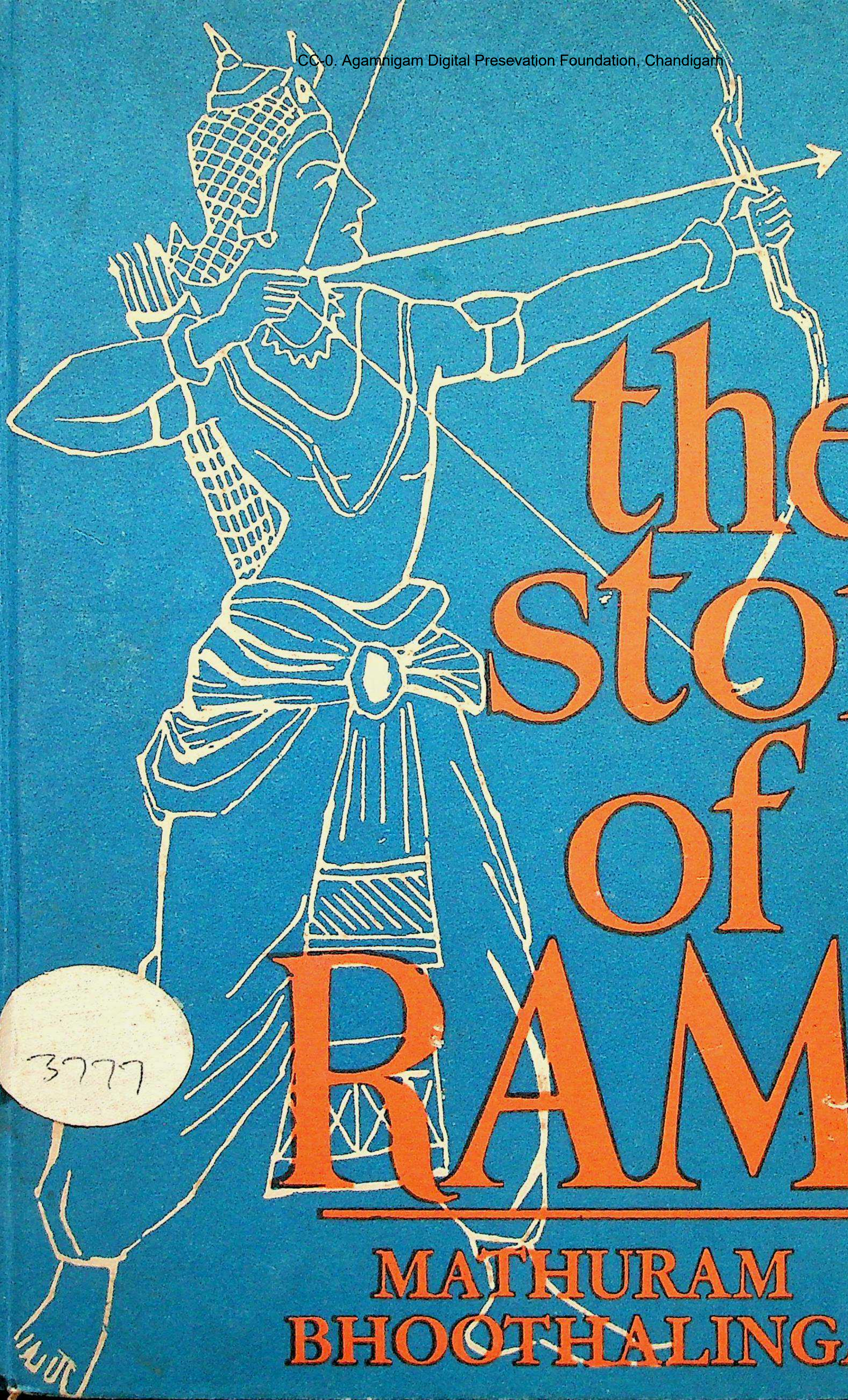

# the story of RAMA

MATHURAM
BHOOTHALINGAM

3777

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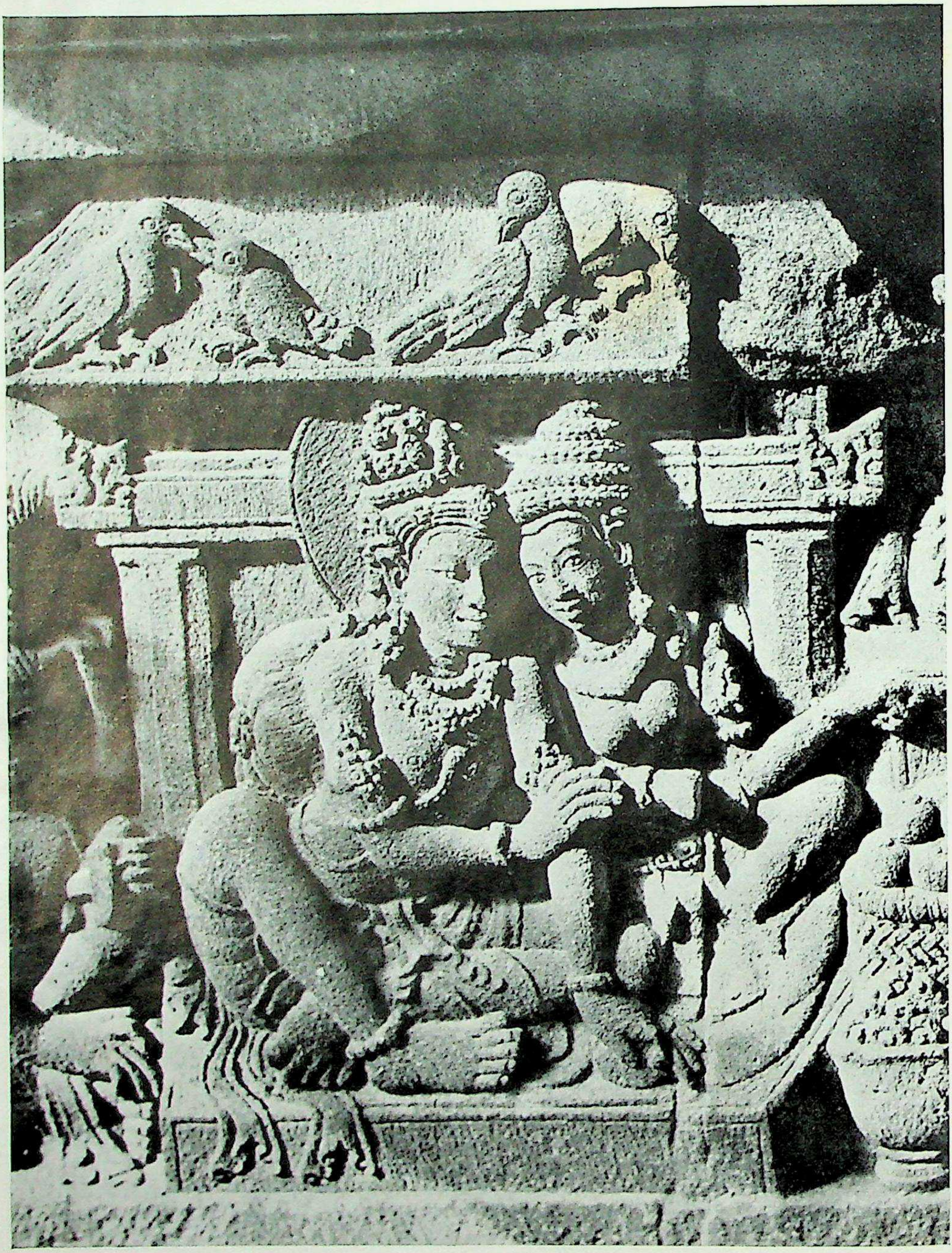
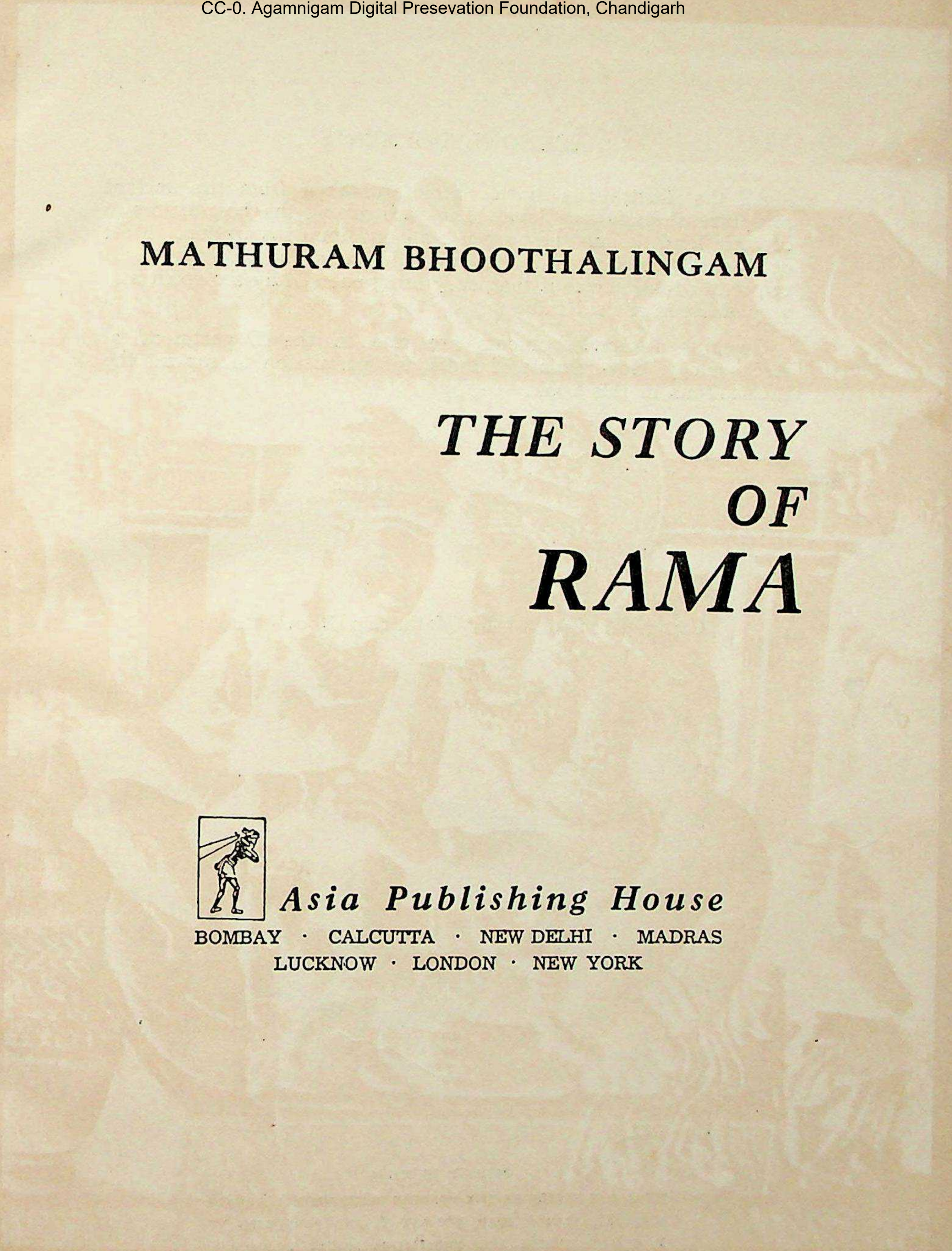


Ṛama and Sita in Ayodhya after the Coronation.



MATHURAM BHOOTHALINGAM

# THE STORY OF RAMA

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

All the illustrations in this book are taken from the ancient sculpture of India and Java. They are among the best examples of their kind though they are not all of Hindu inspiration. Most of them do depict actual scenes from the Ramayana. But the main reason for their choice is that, they bring out vividly the spirit and way of life in ancient India.

Grateful acknowledgements are due to the Department of Archaeology, Government of India, for permission to reprint the illustrations in this book.

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*To*
*my dear mother*
*who told it to us*
*when we were young*

# Introduction

The Ramayana is the story of Rama. According to tradition, it was composed by the sage and poet Valmiki through divine inspiration. To this day, the Ramayana is recited and sung all over India. The power of this great epic to move men and women remains as great as ever.

How the sage Valmiki started his great epic poem is itself an interesting story. One day while walking along the river, he saw two birds billing and cooing on a tree. They were a delightful pair and Valmiki stopped to watch them at play in blissful happiness. Suddenly, the calm silence was rent by the piercing shriek of one of the birds. Struck by the arrow of a passing hunter it fell down twitching, gasping for breath. Its mate followed, moaning and flapping its wings pitifully. Valmiki was deeply moved. Turning reproachfully to the hunter, he asked, "How could you be so cruel?"

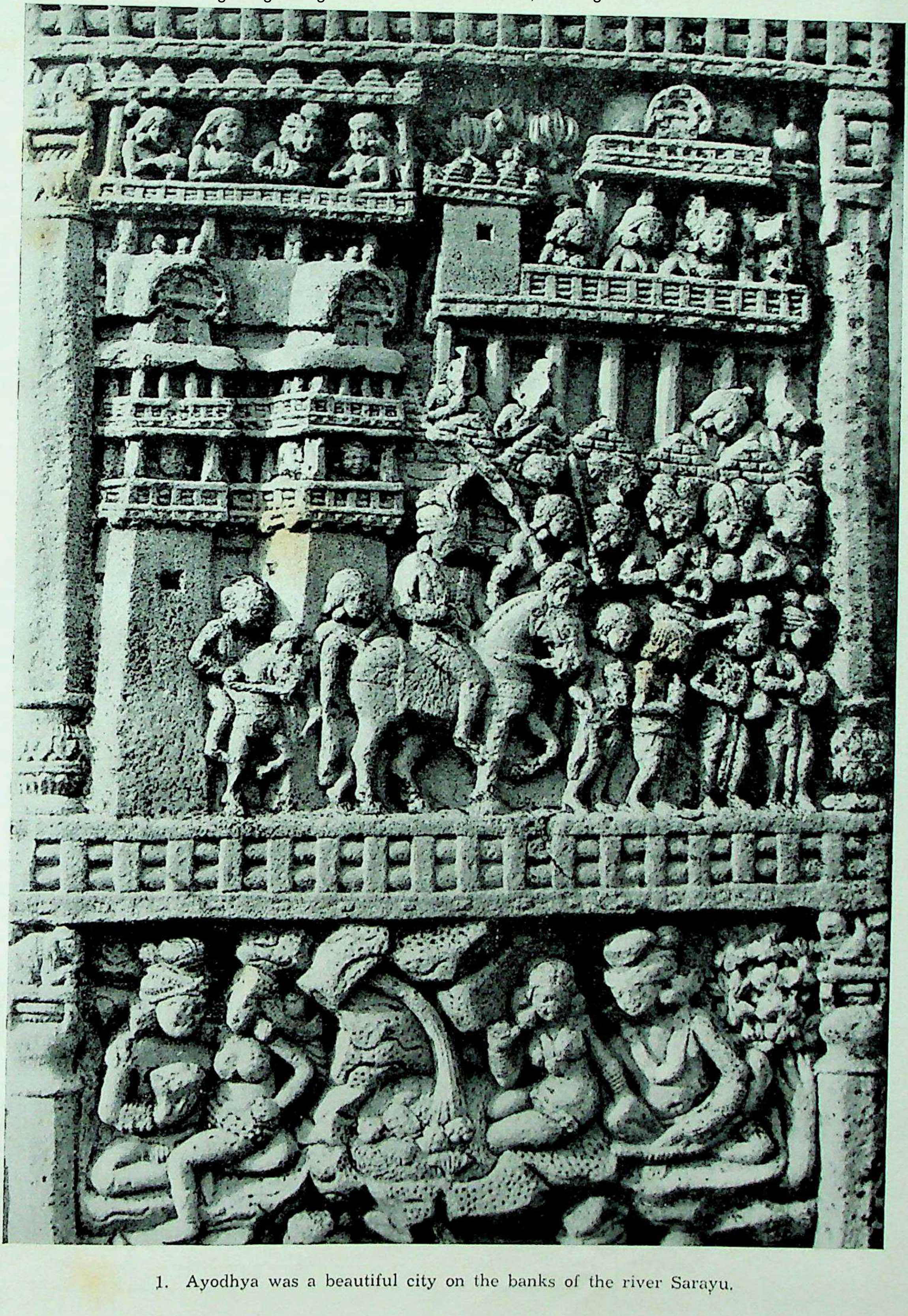
Hardly knowing what he was doing, the sage muttered to himself about the sad fate of the birds. The words that issued from his lips had a strange beauty. Slowly he repeated the words to himself again and suddenly it dawned on him that he was composing verses. What a marvel of a gift! Did he have it all the time? Or had the gods now chosen to endow him with it? Why? What had he done to deserve this divine favour?

While these thoughts were occupying his mind, God Brahma appeared before him in human form and said, "You are the very man I have been looking for. The story of the Ramayana has to be made known to the world. It will be remembered on earth as long as the mountains stand and rivers flow. This shall be the holy work to which you will devote your gift of word and song; and your name will live and be blessed for ever as the poet of the Ramayana."

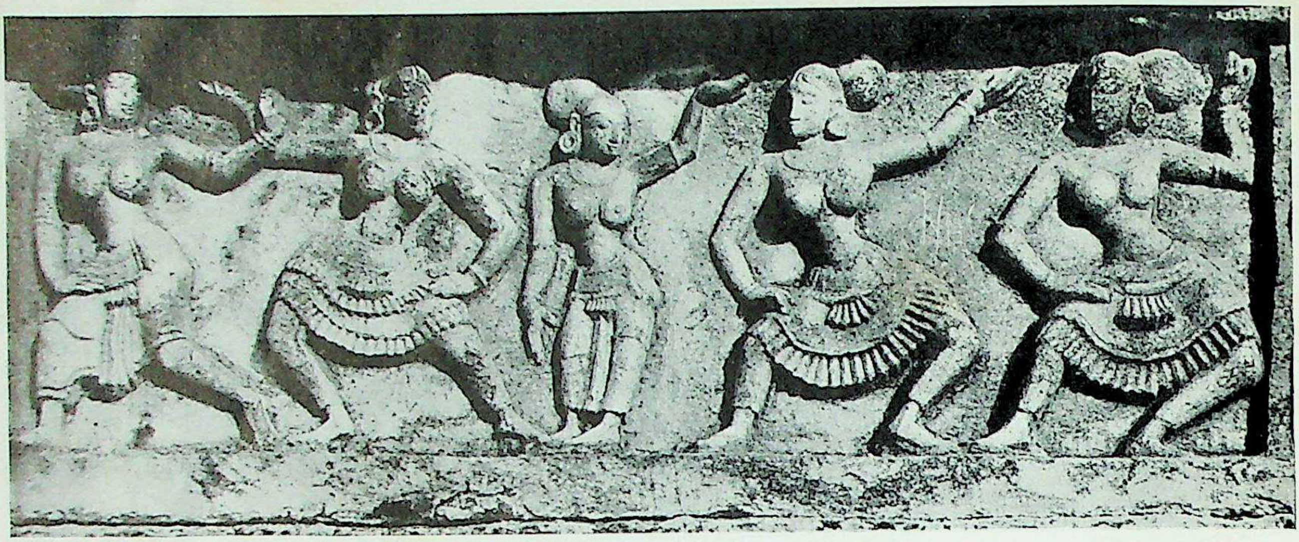
After saying this Brahma disappeared, but his words continued to ring in Valmiki's ears. He started singing to himself, softly, again and again. Thus began the great epic Ramayana in the form in which we know it. As time passed, Valmiki taught his pupils to sing these verses.

They, in turn, sang them joyously and taught others the glorious rhythms of the epic.

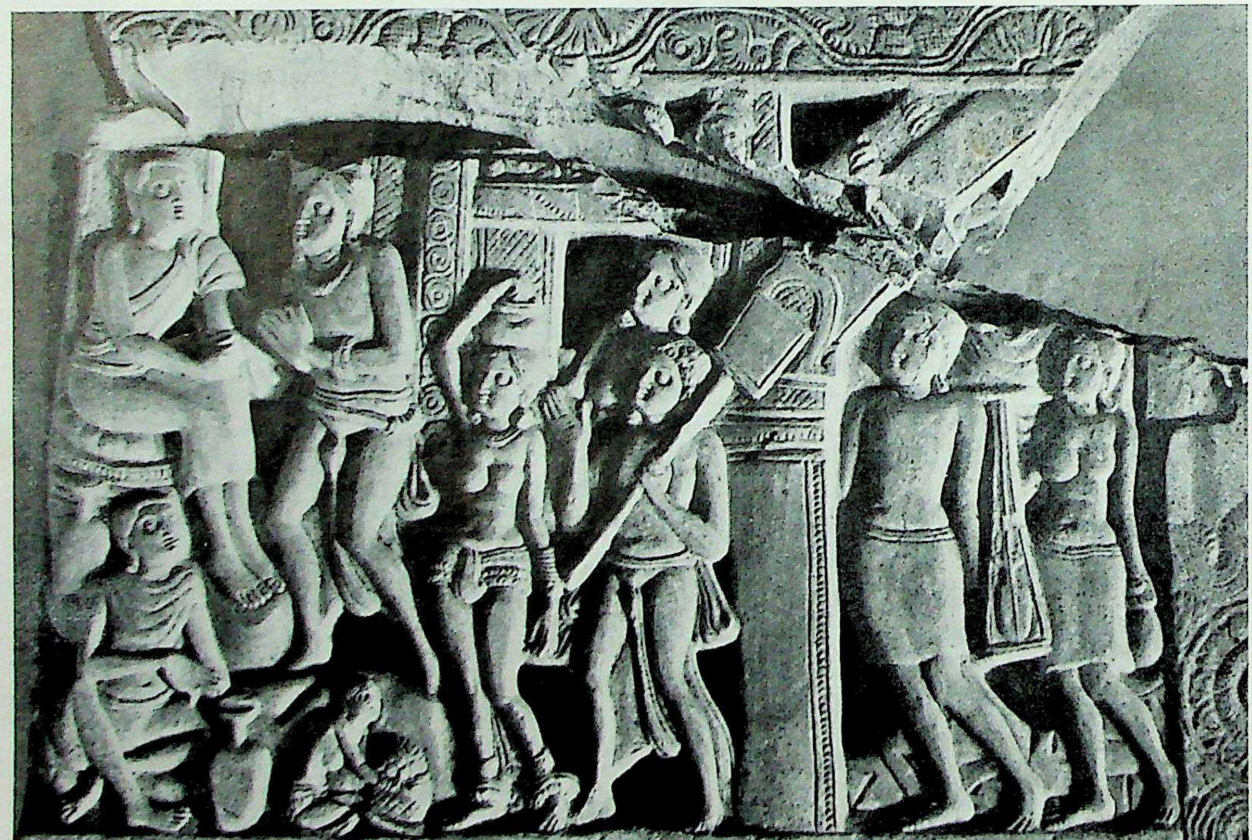
Thus, for generations, the Ramayana lived and spread through the memories of men and women. In later ages, the verses were written down. But all the time, and even today, large numbers of people all over India prefer the Ramayana to be read or sung to them.



1. Ayodhya was a beautiful city on the banks of the river Sarayu.



2. The people of Ayodhya loved music, dancing and play-acting.



3. These happy people had as their king the great and wise Dasaratha.

# Chapter One

Ayodhya was the capital of the kingdom of Kosala. It was a beautiful city, on the banks of the river Sarayu, with lovely temples and gardens. Everything about it was happy and joyous—the gardens, the fields, the trees, the flowers, the birds and the people.

The streets of Ayodhya were clean and well kept. The land was rich and there was enough for all. There were no beggars. The town buzzed with activity. Its citizens were busy, happily occupied in different trades. The people of Ayodhya were pious and god-fearing and there was not a man in the city who did not offer his daily prayers to the gods. They were good soldiers too, and loyal to their king. But mainly, they were a kindly, jovial and contented people. They enjoyed good living and loved music, dancing and play-acting. Not only the nobles but the common people as well attended theatres and music halls.

These happy people had as their king the great and wise Dasaratha, famous in all the three worlds both for his martial prowess and for his goodness. He was just, kind and pious. Even Indra, king of the heavens, had once asked for his help. To do his duty as king was Dasaratha's first and foremost care. In this he was ably helped by good ministers. His chief guru was the famous rishi Vasishta, a sage of great learning and wisdom, respected by all and by the Great God Brahma himself. With a king like Dasaratha as protector, the people lived free from fear, happy and contented, for the king sought his happiness in that of his people.

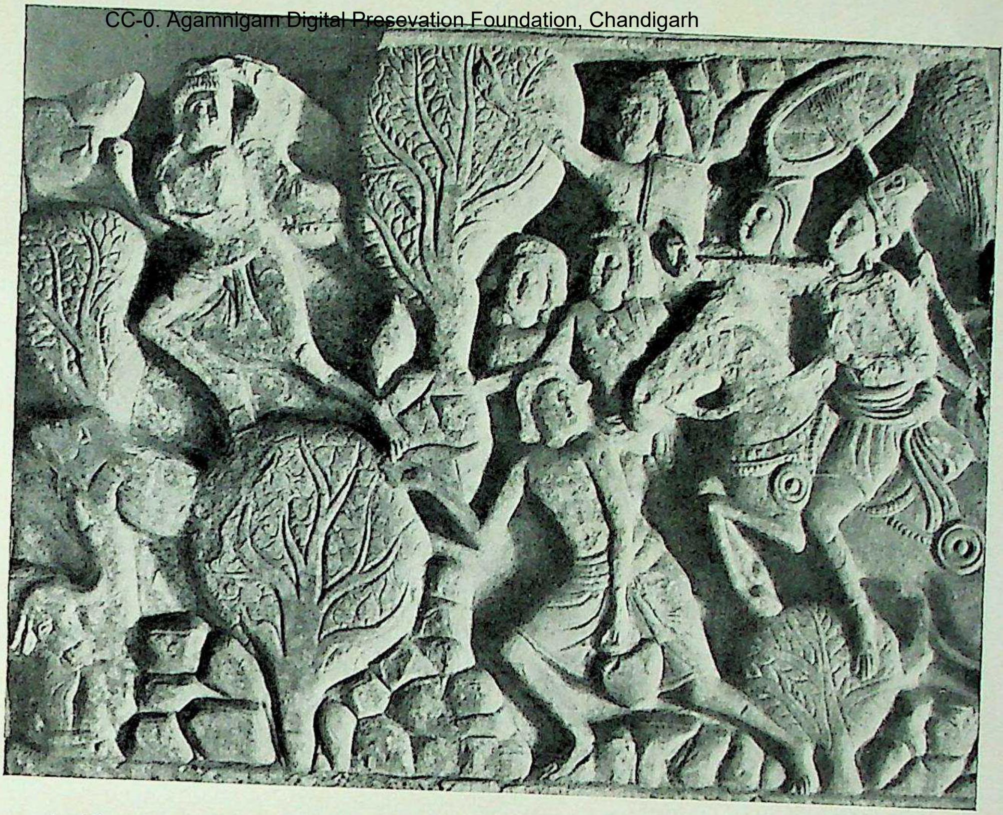
King Dasaratha should have been the happiest of men, for he had almost everything that men desire. Yet, he was very unhappy. He had no children, no son to whom he could turn in his old age. Who would shoulder the cares of his mighty kingdom after his death? This thought worried Dasaratha and brought wrinkles to his face. The wise Vasishta, who knew that Dasaratha was beloved of the gods, therefore, advised the king to perform the great sacrifice called "Aswamedha" or the horse sacrifice.

In those days, the horse sacrifice was recognized as the holiest of all sacrificial rites. Only a very powerful king, feared and respected by the rulers of the surrounding countries, could undertake the horse sacrifice. To prove his strength, he had first to send out the sacrificial horse to roam at will for a year in the neighbouring kingdoms. The horse would be escorted by a troop of soldiers chosen for their strength and bravery. It was only when the horse returned home unchallenged by any other king—for no ordinary man would even think of it—that the sender could perform the sacrifice.

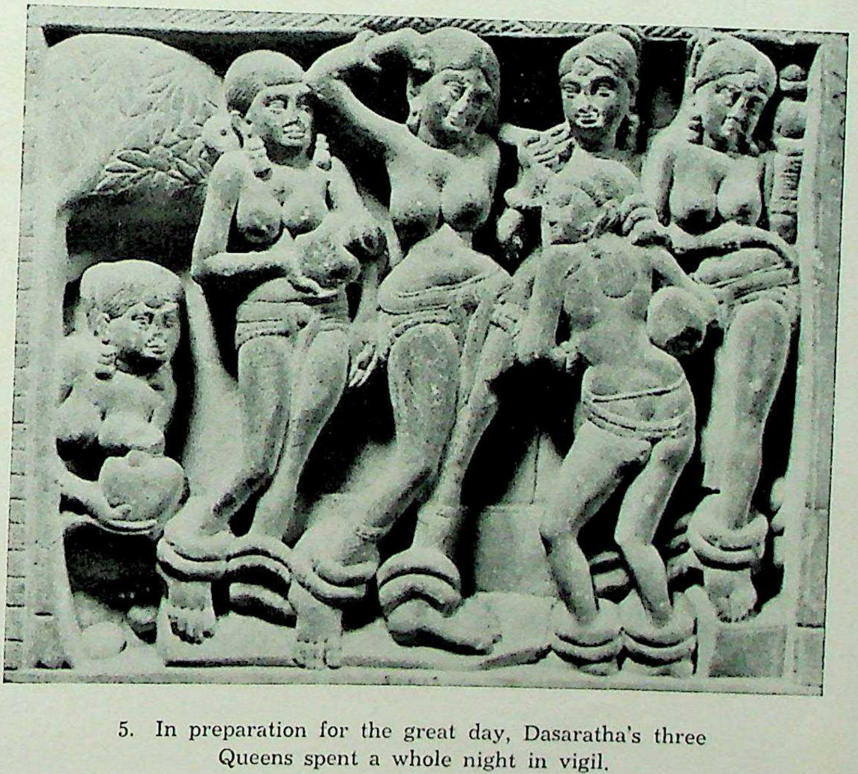
King Dasaratha had strong standing armies led by great warriors renowned for their valour. No king, therefore, dared stop or molest Dasaratha's horse, which returned in triumph after a year's wandering round the world. Greatly pleased, Dasaratha started preparing for the event. All the other kings and their nobles were invited. He made special arrangements to receive and entertain them, and himself looked after every detail. With his own hands he ploughed and prepared the ground chosen for the sacrifice on the banks of the Sarayu. Vasishta arranged the altar. Special priests were appointed to see that all the rites were performed to perfection. On an auspicious day Dasaratha lit the sacrificial fire, and for days the priests chanted hymns and poured offerings into it. It was a festive occasion, royally celebrated. Dasaratha entertained hundreds of kings, nobles and friends assembled for the event, and gave away munificent gifts of cattle, land and gold to the Brahmins.

Then, in preparation for the great day, Dasaratha's three queens, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, spent a whole night in vigil with the sacrificial horse. The next day, with a heart full of hope, Kausalya, Dasaratha's first queen, slew the horse with a sword. The priests then divided the slain horse into sixteen parts and put them each into the fire. The gods were pleased and received the offerings. Then the chief priest said special prayers for the birth of a son to the king. As the chanting of priests rose to heaven, Dasaratha prayed.

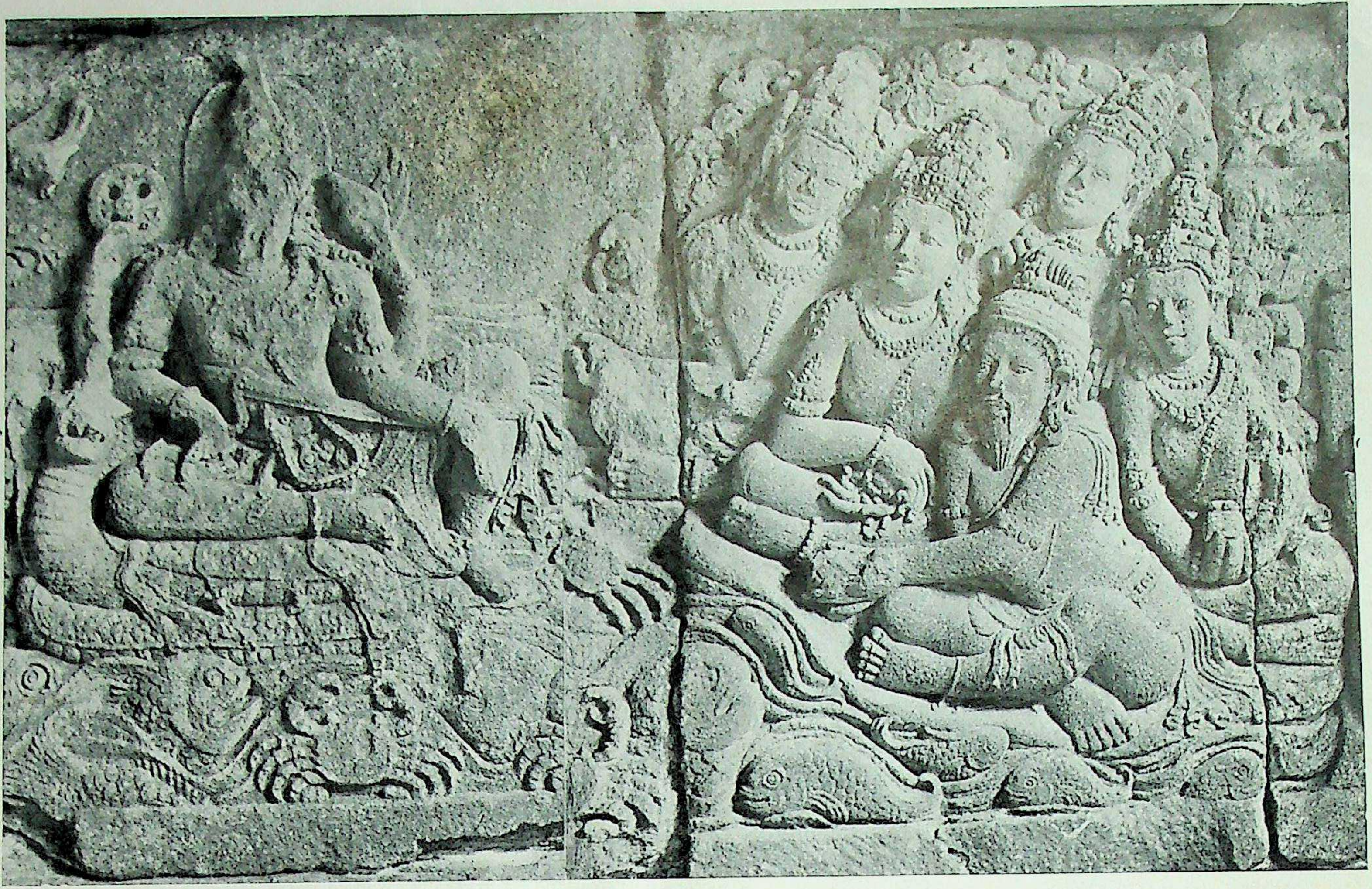
The devas, immortal beings of light, who peopled the world above the sky, were moved by Dasaratha's sorrow and supplication. They were half-divine and had many superhuman qualities. Indra, their king, was the rain god. His weapon was the thunderbolt. The fire-god was Agni and the wind-god was Vayu. There were hundreds of such gods in Indra's heaven. But even to them life was not always pleasant. They were troubled and harried by their traditional enemies, the asuras. These asuras, also called rakshasas, were the exact opposite of the devas; they represented the powers of evil. But they were strong and skilful and possessed many magic charms which they used



4. The Aswamedha horse was escorted by a troop of brave soldiers.



5. In preparation for the great day, Dasaratha's three Queens spent a whole night in vigil.



6. "You must save us from the wicked Ravana" implored Indra, and Vishnu, in His supreme compassion, promised to do so.

against the devas in their unending war. Sometimes the devas were so hard-pressed that they had to look to Vishnu, the Supreme God for help.

At the time Dasaratha was performing the Aswamedha, the devas were being troubled by a ten-headed rakshasa, called Ravana. He was the son of a rishi, and learned in the Vedas (scriptures). By long years of prayer and penance, he had won unusual boons from God Brahma. One of the boons was that neither the devas nor the asuras could kill him. Ravana, therefore, thought that he was immortal. His strength and arrogance grew day by day. He began to trouble the people of both earth and heaven. Kubera, the god of wealth and the king of Lanka, was driven away from his land, and Ravana, the learned and powerful rakshasa, son of a sage and a Brahmin, usurped his throne and declared himself the king of Lanka.

The devas felt helpless against Ravana, whom they could not kill. They were forced to submit to his insults. This they did many a time. But one day, an ingenious way of putting an end to Ravana struck them. Ravana had so much contempt for men that, when he asked Brahma for his great boon, he did not bother to include man as among those who could not kill him. It was this in which the devas saw their chance. Only man, weak as he was, could kill Ravana. Therefore, it was necessary to find a man who was strong enough and brave enough to fight Ravana. But where could they find such a man?

It was when they were puzzling over this problem that Dasaratha's prayers reached them. Here was a great king, thought Indra, who was praying for children. Why not give him a son who could help them against Ravana? So thinking, Indra hurried to the Supreme God Vishnu and explained his idea. "You must save us from the wicked Ravana. Because of Brahma's boon, he cannot be killed by devas or asuras. Only man remains. Create that man and save us," implored Indra. Vishnu, in His supreme compassion, promised the king of the devas that he would come down to the earth in the form of man; he would be born as Rama, son of King Dasaratha.

Meanwhile, in Ayodhya the oblations continued to be poured into the fire. The priests were chanting. The king was in deep meditation. At that moment, there arose from the fire a most dazzling being, lustrous as the sun, with a golden bowl in his hands.

"King Dasaratha," said the divine form, "the Gods are pleased with you. They have sent you this nectar. Let your wives partake of it and they shall bear you sons." So saying, the brilliant form disappeared as quickly as it had come.

The king was speechless with joy. As soon as the sacrifice was over, he hurried to his queens with the golden bowl in his hands. "Here is the nectar sent by the gods. Drink it that you may have sons," he said to them. The three queens, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi, received the bowl with happy faces. And as they partook of the gift of the gods, they looked more beautiful than ever.

Of the three lovely queens of the king, Kausalya was the eldest. She was also the most pious and noble. Sumitra, the second, was wise and just. Kaikeyi, the youngest, was the most beautiful of them all and best loved by the king.

In the month of Chaitra, Rama was born to Kausalya; Bharata was born to Kaikeyi and Lakshmana and Satrughna, to Sumitra. Dasaratha now felt that he had attained the crowning happiness of his life. He thanked the gods, and made rich presents to priests and Brahmins. Prisoners were set free. Three days were set apart for public celebration and feasting, and the peals of crashing temple bells announced the glad news to the world. The people rejoiced and the streets of Ayodhya echoed with their laughter and song.

# Chapter Two

The four sons of King Dasaratha grew into tall, strong and handsome lads. They were the joy of the city. As they moved about in the streets of Ayodhya, their noble mien and proud carriage drew the admiration of the people, just as their kind and gentle manners won their affection. They rode on horses and elephants and often went hunting into the forests. Like all princes they were taught fencing, archery and how to wield arms of all kinds. Soon they excelled in all martial virtues.

The sage Vasishta himself saw to their education and was their chief guru. Under his guidance and care they learnt the Vedas which contained all the wisdom of the ancestors, and the Sastras, that is, the principal sciences. But, above all, he imparted to them his own wisdom and made them aware of the duties of a king—to protect his people from enemies, to rule them justly and wisely, to look after them with loving care like his own children and to establish and preserve Dharma, the rule of the moral law.

The king loved all his sons dearly. But Rama was nearest to his heart, for he was always quick to do what his father desired of him, even without being told. Naturally, this specially endeared him to Dasaratha. The other princes were not slow to follow. They too loved and honoured their father and took pride in being good sons. To the princes of Ayodhya, King Dasaratha's word was law, and in its obedience, they found their joy.

The brothers often played, rode and hunted together. Of them, Lakshmana was particularly devoted to Rama and Satrughna to Bharata. The dark Rama and the fair Lakshmana became an inseparable pair.

When the princes became sixteen years old, King Dasaratha thought that they should get married. He summoned his councillors and asked for their advice. It was not very easy to find princesses worthy of Rama and his brothers, but the ministers and councillors put their heads together.

While they were talking, a herald entered and announced that the great sage Viswamitra had arrived and desired audience with the king. Viswamitra was a renowned Rajarishi, that is to say, a king who had given up everything to become a sage. He was acknowledged as one of the greatest of all sages, second only, if at all, to Vasishta himself. He was also known to be capable of sudden bursts of anger. King Dasaratha, therefore, greeted him with great joy, but also with some misgiving.

"To what do I owe this honour?" said the king. "Revered sage, how can I repay the great happiness you have given me by your presence here today? Speak, and your will shall be done."

Viswamitra was pleased with the king's words.

"Most nobly spoken, Oh king. Your words are worthy of the great dynasty of Ikshvaku to which you belong. Who else would speak thus and offer me help even before I ask for it? It is clear that the wise Vasishta is your guru. I already feel rewarded by your promise."

"Ask and you shall be served," repeated Dasaratha, little dreaming what was to come.

"Great king, you must have heard of the rakshasas headed by the wicked Ravana who are running amok all over the land, striking terror into the hearts of the people. Some of these are now bent on disturbing the peaceful ashrams of the sages in the forests. My friends and I are engaged in some important sacrificial rites. The rakshasas disturb us continually and are a hindrance to our holy task. We need a warrior to subdue these demons. Send Rama with me to the forest so that he may fight and destroy them for us."

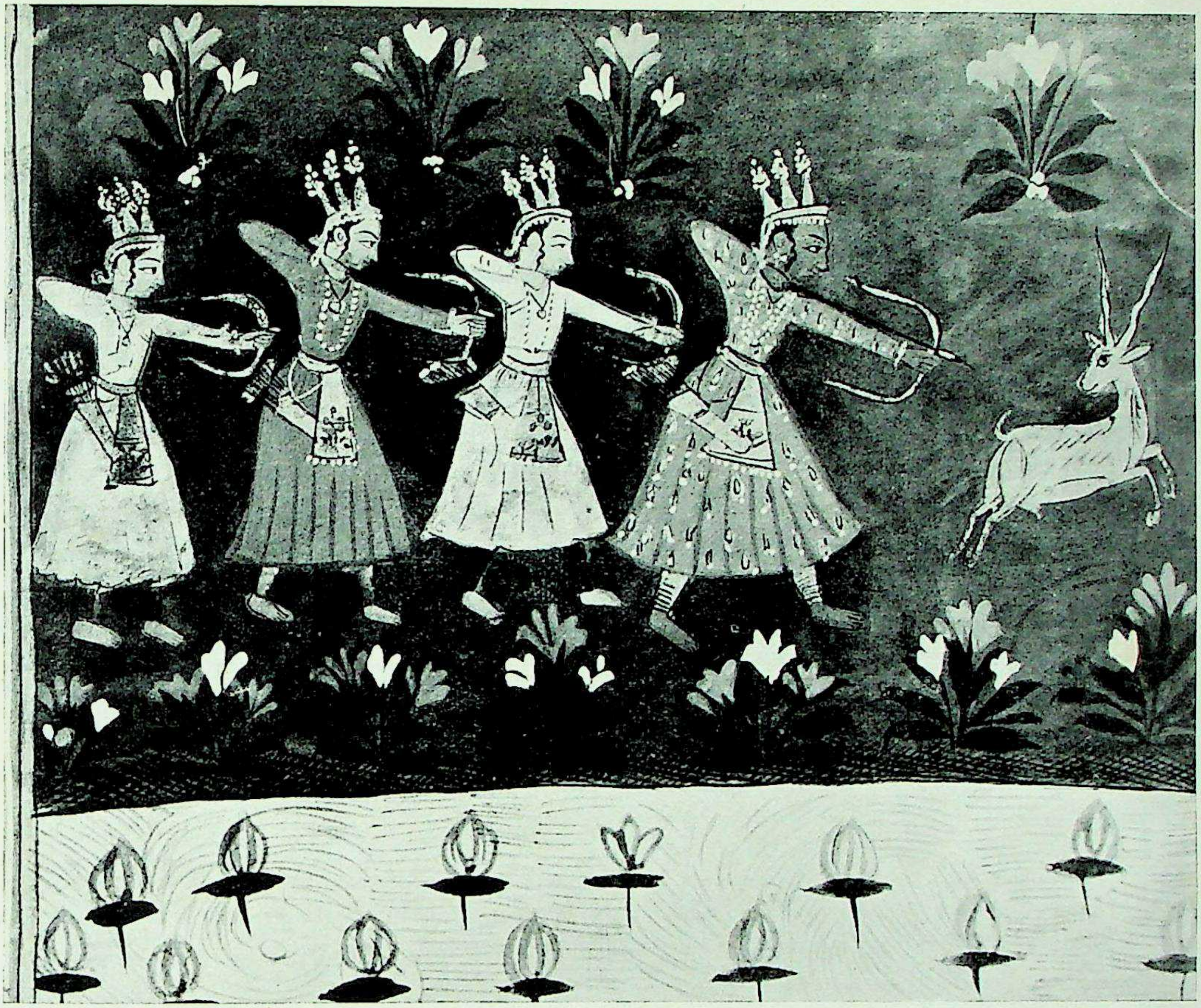
At this unexpected request, the king trembled inwardly. He dared not refuse Viswamitra. At the same time, the thought of exposing his beloved Rama to those demons worried him a great deal.

"Great sage, these rakshasas are dangerous and treacherous fighters. They practise magic charms and are considered unconquerable. How can a young lad of sixteen stand against them, not to say kill them? Take me instead. I am old and well versed in the art of warfare. I shall bring my army with me and fight the demons for you."

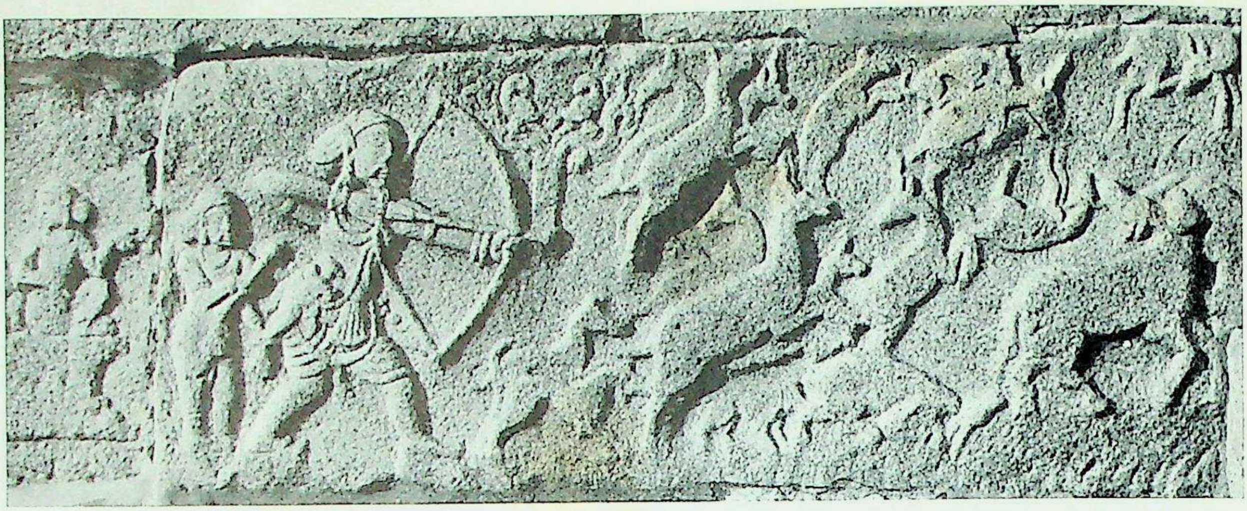
If he thought these words would satisfy the sage, he was mistaken. Viswamitra's smile disappeared. He glowered darkly. "King, you no longer speak like one worthy of your great family. You promised to fulfil my wishes. And yet you refuse to send Rama with me when I ask for him. What does this mean? Are you going back on your word?"

The king parried. "Wise sage, I shall come and help you. How could I keep my word better than by promising to come myself?"

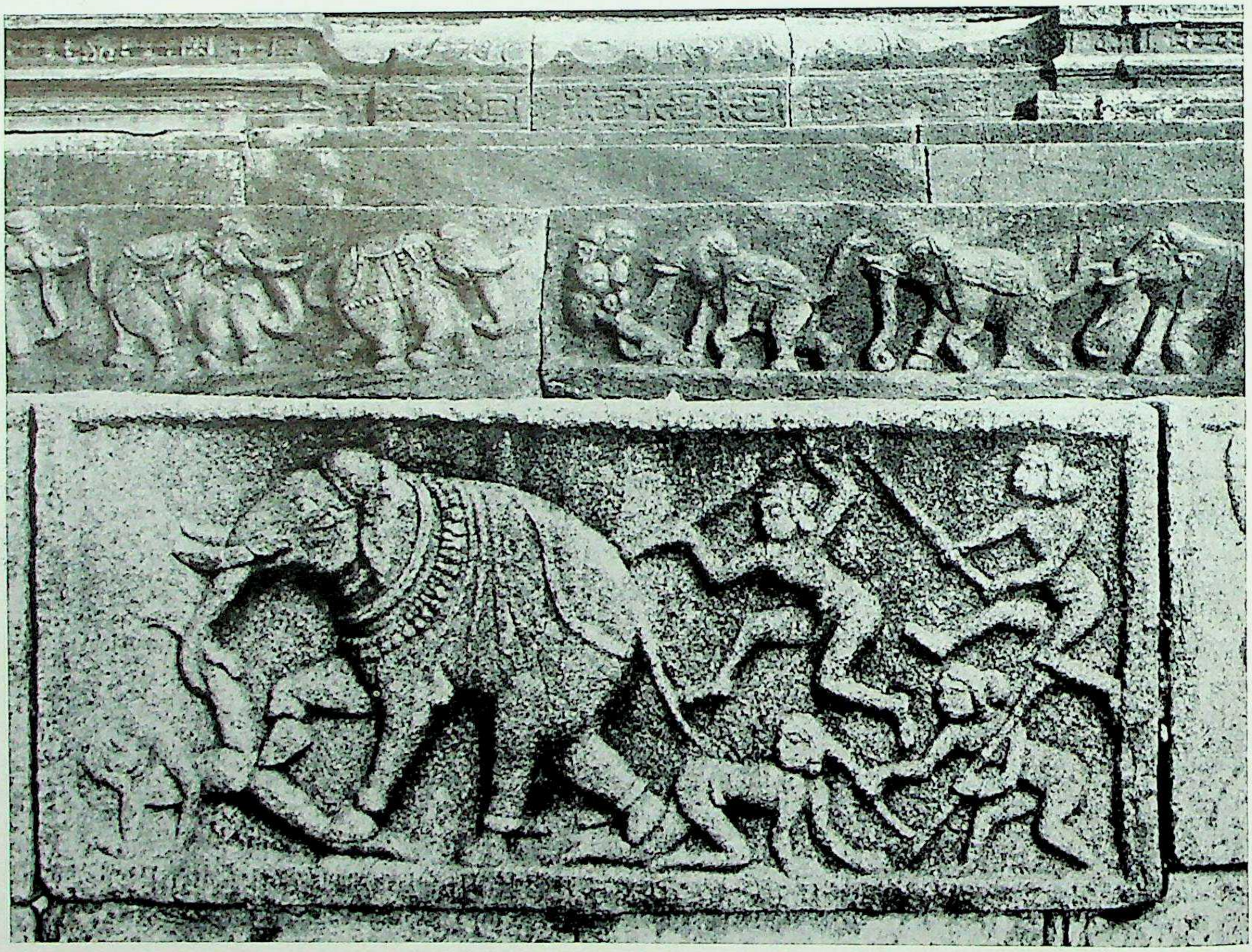
"Enough," cried Viswamitra, now truly angry. "Live in peace, Oh



7. The four sons of King Dasaratha grew into tall, strong and handsome lads.



8. . . . and were taught fencing and archery.



9. They often went hunting into the forests . . . .

King. I shall go elsewhere for help. Let King Dasaratha be happy in the knowledge that he refused aid, after offering it. Adieu!"

The whole court was petrified with fear at these words. Viswamitra could be terrible when thwarted.

Then Vasishta intervened gently. "Surely you know, without my telling you, all about the greatness of Viswamitra. He is well known in the three worlds, as a man who is capable of getting what he wants by the power of his penance and the lustre of his glorious piety. It is not that he cannot destroy the demons himself. He is famous for his skill in war. He has great knowledge of the use of many secret weapons. It is only for Rama's good that he wants to take him. Perhaps he may even train him in all the secrets of warfare he possesses."

At these wise words of Vasishta, the king woke up to the true greatness of Viswamitra. He realized that with such a protector, Rama could come to no harm and that he had allowed his natural love for his son to cloud his judgment. With a restored mind, he sent for his son.

Who should come with Rama into the council hall but Lakshmana! Like a shadow he followed his brother. Both princes bowed to the king and the sages. Then they waited in respectful silence for the king to speak.

The king bade them go with Viswamitra and do his bidding even as they would his own. The boys left. They were eager to see the world and had no fear of danger. The king, the queens and the nobles of the court blessed them with all their hearts.

Away went the three into the deep forest, the all-powerful Viswamitra and the two young princes, destined to be the slayers of demons. How well they walked, the two princes—their broad shoulders made broader by their bows and quivers. Love of adventure and eagerness to join battle shone in their faces, making their noble countenances even more divine and radiant than ever. As they walked, Viswamitra told them the history of the great kings of their dynasty who had lived and reigned before them. This aroused the interest of the princes and made them even more keen to win glory for themselves.

As Vasishta had predicted, Viswamitra taught the two princes many secrets of archery, fencing and wrestling. He knew they would need all their skill and wits to deal with the demons. The sage was pleased with the keenness the princes showed. "May you be victorious," he blessed them.

The next day, the travellers entered a deep forest. The thickness of the dark foliage and the roaring of the wild animals gave the place a fearful look. The princes felt a foreboding of evil and asked the sage the name of the forest.

"This is the forest of Tataka. The she-demon of that name lives here with her two wicked sons. Once, this used to be a smiling prosperous land, but these cruel rakshasas worried the people so much that soon they deserted the place and a thick forest grew all over. Now, none but wild beasts roam here. Tataka and her sons are constantly terrorizing the neighbouring lands and penance groves. Rama, you will do much good by killing her."

"How can I kill a woman?" Rama asked hesitantly.

"Do not be swayed by pity. She is not a mere woman, but the cruellest of rakshasis. A king's duty is to protect his subjects from evil and Tataka is evil itself," said Viswamitra firmly.

"Your will is law to me," replied Rama bowing reverently, "Father desired it should be so." So saying Rama took out his bow and prepared himself to kill Tataka.

To bring her out of her den he let loose an arrow in the air. The sound and fury which followed stirred the entire animal life of the forest. Roused into action, Tataka came running out of her den, wondering who was the bold mortal who dared to start a fight in her forest. What was her surprise when she saw two young princes—mere boys—trying their luck against her mountainous strength! With contemptuous snorts she moved towards them. The young princes tensely watched her approach. Suddenly there was a rain of stones. Looking up they saw that Tataka had risen high up in the air and was descending on them from the clouds.

"There she is," cried Viswamitra. "Raining stones is one of her secret weapons. But I have taught you how to deal with them."

Rama drew an arrow from his quiver, but again hesitated.

"Do not show any mercy. Remember the innocent men and women she has pitilessly killed and the vast tracts of land she has laid waste," exhorted Viswamitra.

Rama began slowly to draw his bow.

"The sun is going down. Rakshasas always become stronger during the night. Hurry up, Rama," urged the sage.

Rama did not hesitate any longer. He drew his bow to the full and aimed his arrow, which swiftly went through the cloud of stones and found its mark. With a roar that drew echoes from heaven, Tataka fell dead on the ground.

Greatly relieved and pleased, Viswamitra pressed the young prince to his heart and rendered thanks to God. They returned in peace to the ashram and started again the sacrifices which had been interrupted. But this peace did not last long. Soon the two sons of Tataka fell upon them, seeking revenge. After a long and bitter struggle at close quarters, Subhahu was struck down. The other son, Maricha, drew back a little to take breath and start the fight again. Rama, however, gave him no respite but shot an arrow which threw him thousands of yards away over the hills. Maricha was now frightened out of his wits, and fled from the spot in great terror. Nevertheless, he did not forget his defeat and humiliation. We shall see later how he looked for vengeance.

Peace reigned again. The sacrifices were triumphantly concluded. Rama and Lakshmana spent many days at Viswamitra's forest abode.

# Chapter Three

After a few weeks, some of the sages suggested that all of them should go on a visit to Mithila, the capital city of Videha, where King Janaka was conducting a great sacrifice.

"It will be a grand occasion. King Janaka is a person worth knowing, and above all the princes can see the famous Siva bow," said the sages.

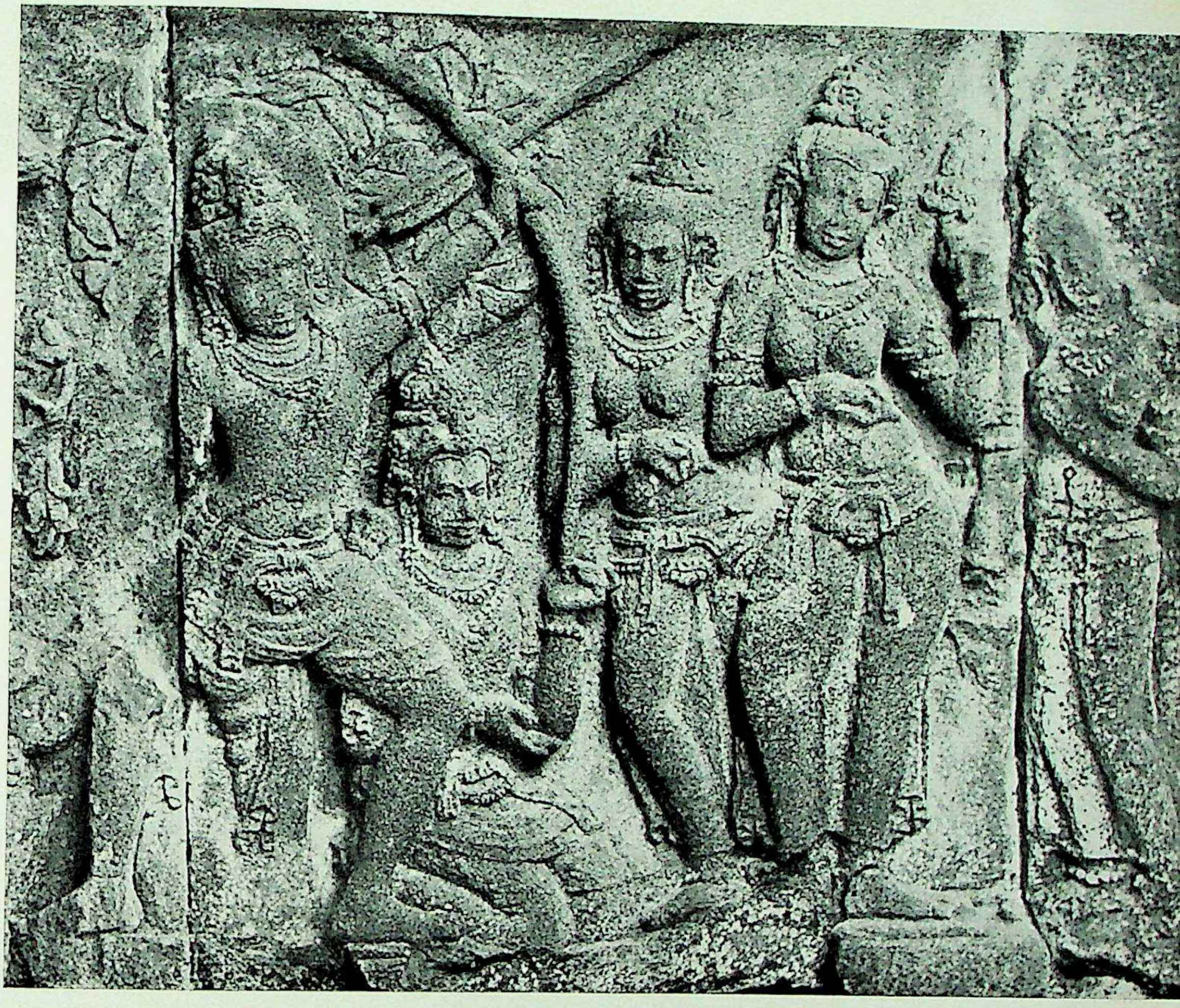
Viswamitra liked the idea; thereupon they all set out for the capital of King Janaka.

Now Janaka was a saintly king, honoured both by men and devas for his goodness. So good was he that he was presented with a divine daughter by no less a person than good Mother Earth herself. The king found her while ploughing the sacred sacrificial field. When he saw a most lovely babe lying on the ploughed earth, he was overjoyed, for he was childless. Thanking the gods for this precious gift, he brought the child home to his queen. His queen received the child with happiness. They named her Sita, or one who was born from the plough, and brought her up with tender care and love.

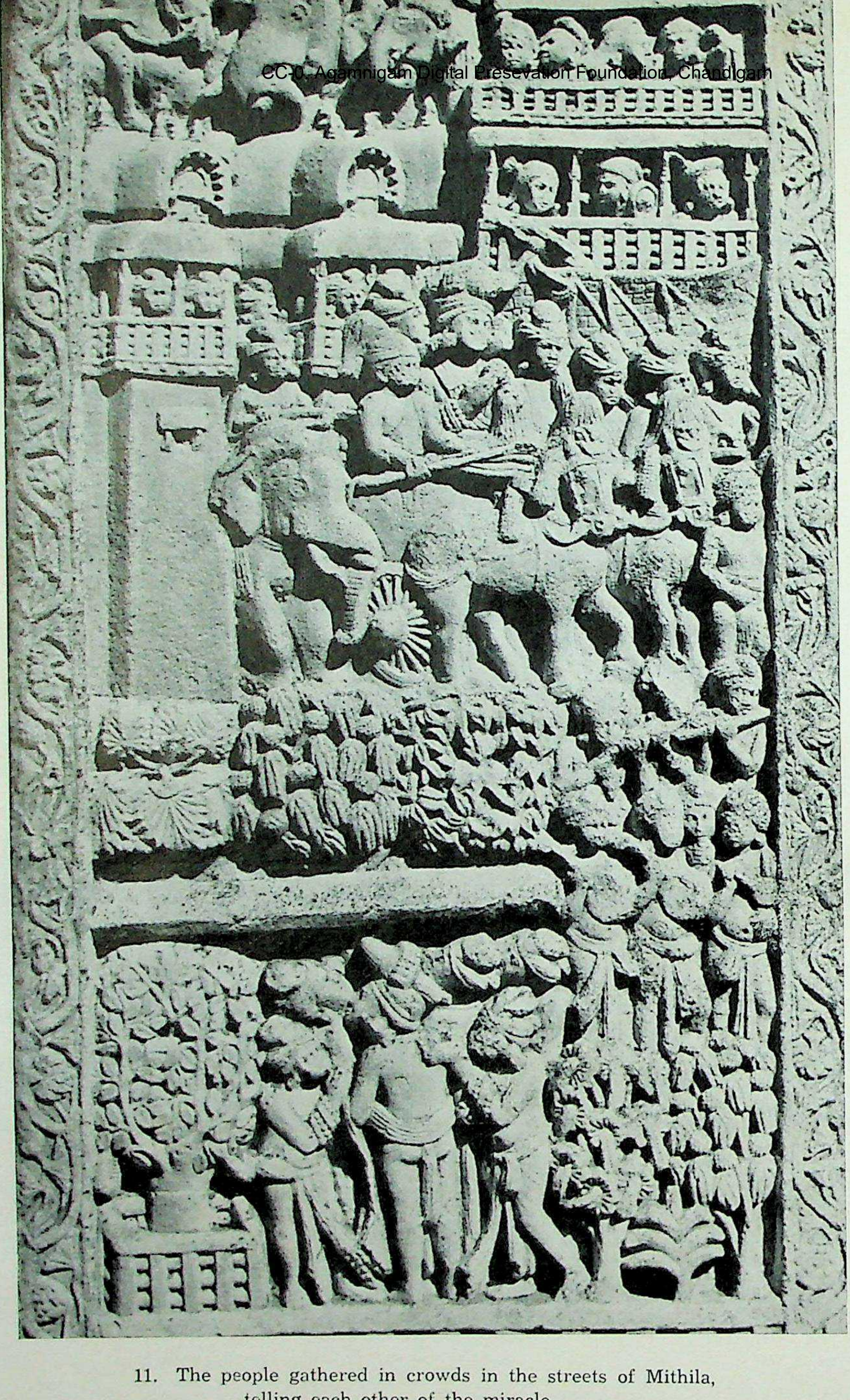
Sita was the loveliest princess in the land. She was as good as she was fair. King Janaka was very proud of her and wanted her to marry the bravest and best prince in the world. As she grew up he became anxious. How was he to find a prince deserving such a rare prize? Then he remembered the mighty Siva bow he had and he announced that Sita would marry the first prince who could string this bow.

Many princes from far-off lands came to try their strength and luck with the Siva bow. Alas! None of them could even lift it, leave alone string it. Poor Janaka was sorely tried. He could not find a spouse equal to Sita. Besides, all the kings were displeased with him for setting them such a task. At the same time they coveted Sita, the exquisite maiden. So, from time to time, they tried to threaten Janaka with their arms. Janaka had almost given up all hope, when Viswamitra arrived in Mithila with the two sons of King Dasaratha.

At the sight of the famous rishi, the king rose hastily from his



10. Suddenly the air was rent with a tremendous noise . . . Rama had lifted the bow and in trying to string it had broken it into two.



11. The people gathered in crowds in the streets of Mithila, telling each other of the miracle . . . .

golden throne. "Welcome great sage," he cried. "To think that you have thought of gracing my poor sacrifice with your presence! How lucky I am! But tell me who are these lads with shining eyes and noble faces?"

Viswamitra gave an indulgent smile. "These are the sons of King Dasaratha of Ayodhya. They have come to see the bow!"

"Oh!" exclaimed King Janaka with a doubtful look at the young lads. "By all means. Let them see it. I must warn you that lifting it is a difficult task. Every prince is eager for the hand of Sita. So many have tried, but not one could even lift the bow. I begin to wonder if there is anybody in the whole world who can do it. Can a mere man lift the great Siva's bow? Perhaps it was foolish of me to test the princes thus."

All the same the king ordered the grand bow to be brought in. The great box that contained the bow was dragged into the court by many men.

Rama asked whether he might open the box. The old rishi smiled and nodded. The princes were thrilled to see the great bow. What a marvellous bow it was!

"May I lift it?" asked Rama in a quiet modest voice. King Janaka said, "Yes, certainly, you may try."

Suddenly the air was rent with a tremendous noise, loud enough to reach the heavens. The whole earth shook with the shock. Rama had lifted the bow and in trying to string it had broken it into two. It had happened with lightning speed, for those in the court had only seen him lift it. The next minute they heard the thunder-like crash. The great bow had found its master!

Tears of joy flowed down Janaka's cheeks as he saw Rama standing by with a flushed face, holding the two pieces of the bow. At last a hero had come and won the hand of his beloved Sita.

"Rama, Sita, who is dearer to me than my own life, is yours," cried Janaka in deep emotion.

The whole court was agog with excitement. Everybody was talking of the event with wonder and awe. Soon the news spread throughout Mithila. The people gathered in crowds in the streets telling each other of the miracle of the bow, and anxiously craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the hero as he passed by to the guest house where he was staying.

Messengers rode day and night to take the news to King Dasaratha. On the third day they arrived at the city of the Ikshvakus. When Dasaratha heard the glad tidings, his heart was filled with happiness. He felt even the gods could not have had the joy that was his that day. Rama, his Rama, had won the famous princess Sita as the prize of his prowess in arms!

King Dasaratha journeyed to Mithila with a large retinue. His queens, friends, nobles and advisers went with him. He carried rich presents for his dear and old friend Janaka of Videha.

King Janaka welcomed him with open arms. There followed a grand royal wedding. Rama married Sita. Lakshmana, Bharata and Satrughna married Sita's cousins, Urmila, Mandavi and Sruthakirti.

Rama and Sita looked divine in their bridal robes. Sita wore a pale yellow silk edged with golden swans. Her lovely dark hair was entwined in jasmine wreaths. Her beautiful eyes looked with tender adoration at the hero by her side. As for Rama, he stood by his exquisite prize with kingly dignity. But his eyes shone brightly with quiet happiness.

Then in the midst of that assembly of kings and nobles, Janaka placed Sita's hand in Rama's, and pouring over the sacred water, uttered these moving words. "This is Sita, my daughter. Take her as wife. She shall be good, devoted and faithful to you. She shall follow you like a shadow along the path of duty. May you never forsake her."

The gods showered flowers from heaven. The trumpets sounded and everybody joined in blessing the pair.

After the wedding, the sage Viswamitra took leave of the kings and the princes. He was going to the Himalayas for more penance. At the thought of bidding good-bye to Viswamitra who had brought him such renown and happiness, Rama's eyes grew dim. He bowed silently to the revered rishi.

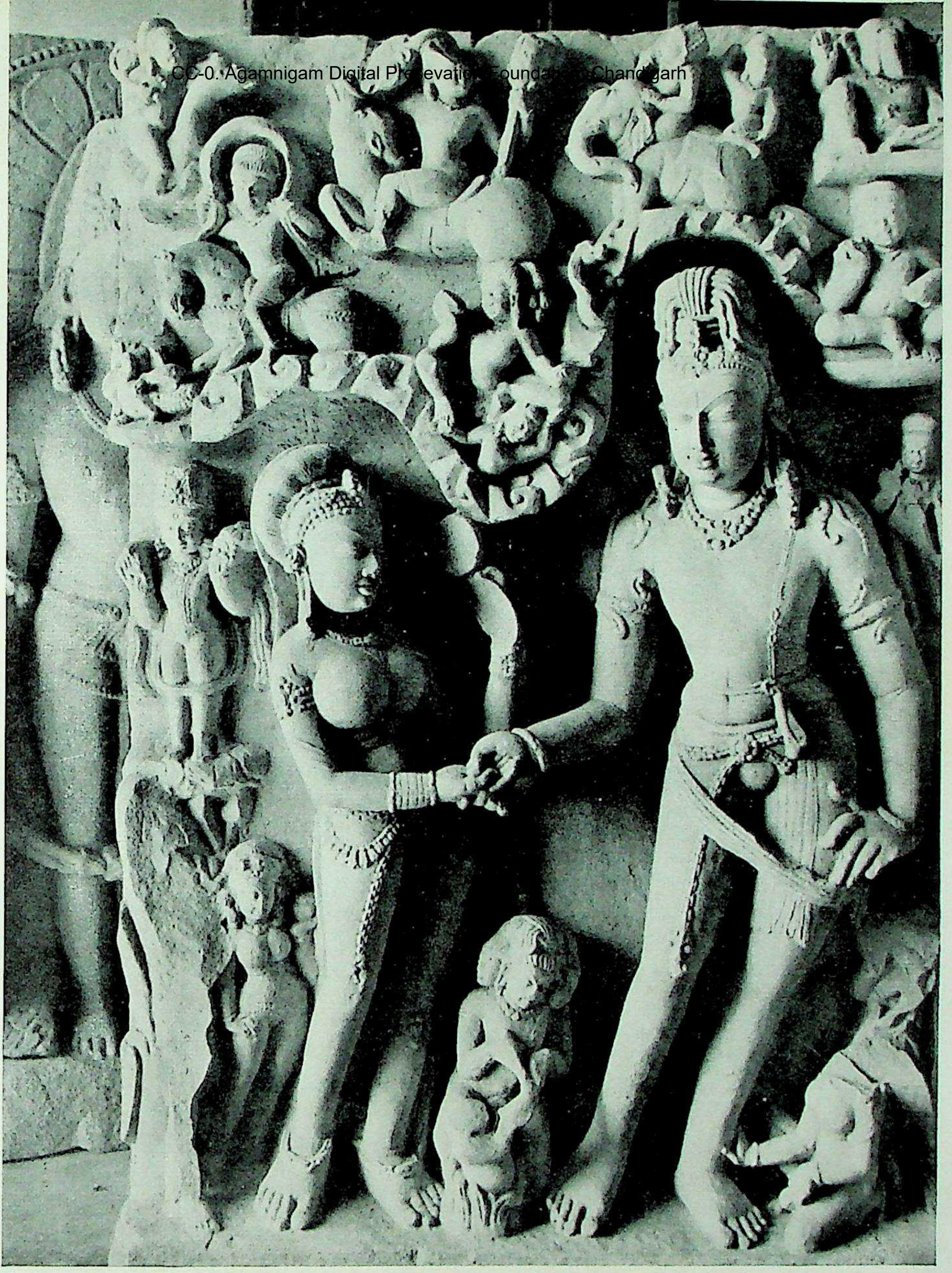
Thereafter, King Dasaratha too departed with his family for Ayodhya. King Janaka loaded his daughter with presents. "Rama, take good care of her. I have given you my greatest treasure," he said to the prince, as they parted.

How happy King Dasaratha was as he turned homewards with his sons!

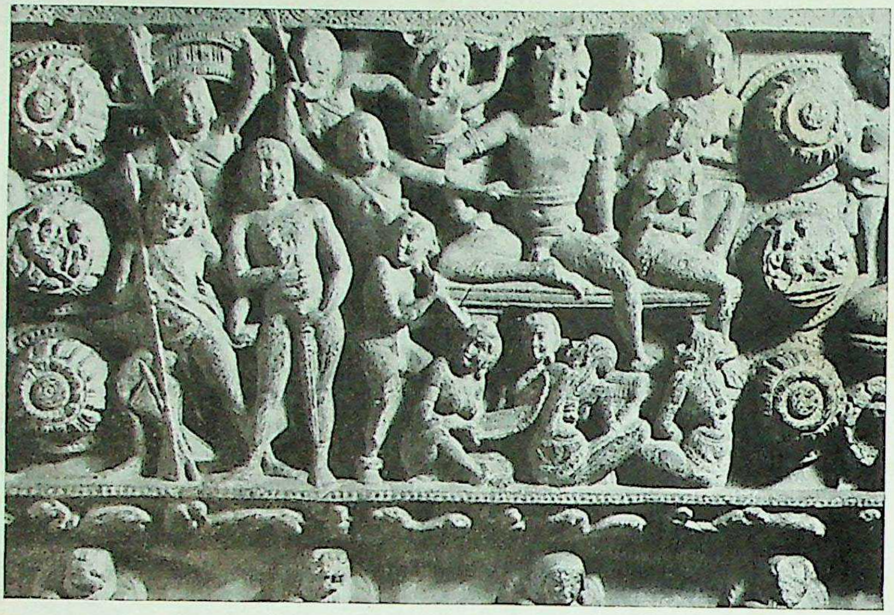
When they were half-way to Ayodhya, they were stopped by the sage Parasurama, who appeared before them all of a sudden. In his hand he held an enormous bow and his face looked menacing.

"I hear you found the Siva bow an easy task, my dear Rama," he said scornfully. "But, look at this—my Vishnu bow. Come on, try it if you dare."

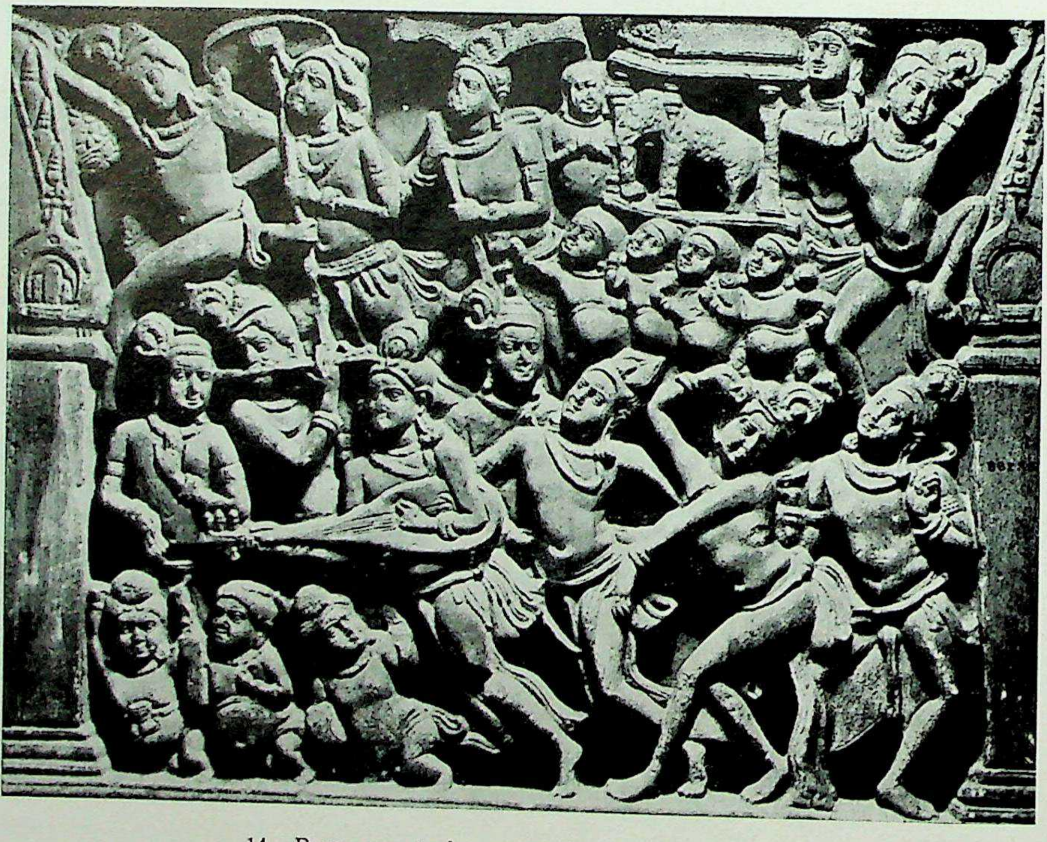
He thrust the bow at Rama's face and glared at him angrily. So great was his anger that dark clouds gathered in the sky and the air became thick with fear. The birds above fluttered their wings in fright and the jackals howled.



12. Then in the midst of that assembly of kings and nobles, Janaka placed Sita's hand in Rama's.



13. "I wish that Rama be your King. He is young, capable and in every way fit to be your ruler" said King Dasaratha to the People's assembly.



14. Rama was to be crowned! Ayodhya went mad with joy.

As soon as Parasurama appeared, poor King Dasaratha was faint with fear. He knew all about this sage who had sworn to kill every royal prince in the land to avenge his father's death. His father had been cruelly killed by a king once—long ago, and ever since Parasurama roamed the earth seeking kings' heads. Counting their heads was a game with him. He killed them all easily, for, like Viswamitra, he too had prayed long and won boons from God for mastery in archery and warfare. No wonder Dasaratha felt his son was in great danger.

But Rama only smiled. The rishi glared at him even more fiercely. Taking the bow from Parasurama's hands with great ease, he fixed an arrow into it with careless grace and asked, "Where shall I aim this arrow? Shall it be your heart? You know well that once an arrow is fixed to the bow, it has to be shot."

The sage was taken aback when he saw how easily Rama handled his famous Vishnu bow. He stood still for a time. Then his face fell and he hung his head in shame.

"Dear Rama," he said in low voice, "great is your deed and greater still your kindness. I know I am no match for you. Please let the arrow go towards the Himalayas and I shall follow it."

So the arrow left the great Vishnu bow and flew swiftly to the mountains far away. Parasurama followed it to the snowy Himalayas, where he could begin afresh a long period of deep meditation.

King Dasaratha heaved a sigh of relief. Once more his beloved son had been saved by a miracle.

Back in Ayodhya, Rama lived happily with the lovely Sita. "They loved each other so much that there was no need of words between them. Their hearts spoke to each other," says the poet Valmiki.

Rama looked after Sita with protective tenderness. He cared for her as Janaka would have. Living in the warmth of such arms, Sita glowed with divine beauty. Her loveliness increased day by day. She was like the lotus flower at dawn blossoming forth at the sight of the glowing face of the sun.

The people of Ayodhya loved their prince Rama. They could not bear to let him out of their sight. He shared their joys and sorrows. He was ever mindful of their wishes and ever ready to go to their rescue in time of need. Rama had truly won not only Sita's heart but also those of the people of the land.

# Chapter Four

When King Dasaratha saw that Rama had won the hearts of the people, he decided to leave the reins of the kingdom to him and retire to the forest. It was the custom in his family to retire thus, after crowning the eldest son. And who could better deserve such a crown than Rama!

Dasaratha loved all his sons, but Rama was the dearest of all to him. Rama was brave, full of strength and prowess. He was ready to fight his enemies and defend the weak. He was soft spoken, gentle in manners and loving in his ways. He was trained in kingly duties and would rule well. He loved his father and treated his advisers with due respect. Kausalya beamed with happiness under his tender regard. Who would refuse such a fine king?

Dasaratha was aware that the people longed to have Rama as king. He, therefore, called together a grand assembly of the realm—nobles, sages, soldiers and the common people. After all had taken their seats, the king got up and said, "Dear friends, you all know the practice of our family. In our old age we retire, leaving the kingdom to the next in succession. Now, I feel old and am no longer able to bear the cares of the kingdom. I would like to seek my end in solitary meditation. I, therefore, propose that Rama, my eldest, be your king. He is young, capable and in every way fit to be your ruler."

At these words of the king, the whole assembly rose and with one voice acclaimed the proposal. Many nobles spoke in praise of Rama, and the common people shouted with joy. Rama was thus chosen to be king.

When his father told Rama about the assembly's decision, Rama simply bowed his head in agreement.

"It shall be as you wish, father," he said, as if it were all the same to him, crown or no crown.

King Dasaratha then sent for his ministers and asked them to prepare to crown Rama the very next day. This surprised them as they thought the king should wait for Bharata, who was away on a visit to his uncle. However, they carried out the king's orders. Vasishta himself looked after all the arrangements.

In the palace, Kausalya, Lakshmana and Sita rejoiced at the news. Queen Kausalya offered prayers to the gods to bring her son good fortune and happiness. Sita and Rama spent that night in prayer and fasting. It was usual to keep a night's vigil thus, before the prince undertook his grave duties.

Queen Kaikeyi was in her palace when the news was brought to her by her maid, Manthara. On hearing it, she jumped from her couch with a beaming face. "What is it you say? My Rama is to be king? What wonderful news you have brought me, Manthara? Here, have this pearl necklace as a reward for it." So saying she dangled the pearls before the maid.

Manthara snatched the necklace and threw it on the floor; her face crumpled in sulky anger.

Kaikeyi was surprised at this behaviour. "What is the matter?" she asked.

"You ask me that, oh queen. Are you not conscious of the doom that awaits you? With Rama as king, what place will you or Bharata have here? Do you believe that Kausalya will treat you with the same respect as before? Are you sure she won't remember your past insults? Poor queen, you are ruined but you do not even see it. Can you not imagine what your fate will be?"

"Manthara, you are mad. How can you think of such things? My Rama is the noblest of men. How dare you insult him?" cried Kaikeyi.

"Alas! Our good days are over. You will be Kausalya's slave and Bharata just a servant in the palace. And I . . . Oh that I should live to see the great Queen Kaikeyi thus!" Manthara broke out into sobs.

Kaikeyi consoled her. "Rama will never allow injustice. We shall live happily with him. Don't you know Rama's character? He is the bravest, the most just and the purest of all men. King Dasaratha has rightly chosen him. Besides, he is the eldest son of the king."

"Tell me then, why this haste? Why should Rama be crowned tomorrow? Why not wait for Bharata? I tell you there is treachery in the air. The king must have thought it all out. He has planned to crown Rama while Bharata is away. Don't you see the king intends to cheat you?"

Kaikeyi frowned. For the first time a shadow of doubt passed across her face. The wicked Manthara was delighted to see that her mistress was weakening. She went on crazily repeating her suspicions. "Poor boy! When I think of Bharata's plight, tears choke my throat. What a fate for the son of Queen Kaikeyi?" The frown on Kaikeyi's face deepened as the meaning of the words began to sink into her mind.

Could it be true? Had the king been deceiving her all along? Was he really planning to quietly remove her from her place of privilege? Was that the reason why he wanted so hurriedly to celebrate the coronation without even waiting for Bharata's return? Even so, how could she suspect evil of Rama? He was the very soul of honour.

"Manthara do not talk stupidly. Are you forgetting that I am King Dasaratha's favourite queen?" she said aloud to the servant.

Manthara shook her head. "No. I am not. All the same, I am surprised at the turn of events. Queen, I fear you are no longer the favourite. Kausalya, Rama's mother will hereafter be the most loved."

At this suggestion, Kaikeyi grew faint with anger. Was she to be thus slighted by her most bitter rival. Kausalya? She tried to calm her own fears.

"No, Manthara, you are wrong. Rama loves me as much as he does his mother. He will see that no harm comes to me."

"Will he? Are you sure that power will not go to his head? Do you think he will remember you and your son once he is king?"

Slowly, the fleeting fears in Kaikeyi's mind grew real. She imagined grave dangers awaited her after Rama's coronation. Manthara encouraged her doubts and they grew bigger and bigger. She forgot Rama's generosity of heart, that he would never dream of making her unhappy. Fear killed all sense in her. Gradually, she came round to the feeling that if Bharata and she were to be happy, Rama should not be king.

No sooner had she thought of it, than she decided to act. Why not ask the king for the two boons he had granted her long ago? It was curious how quickly Kaikeyi forgot her love for Rama. By the time the king arrived, she was all ready for the battle of wits.

Blissfully ignorant of what awaited him, King Dasaratha came in happily to greet his favourite queen. He could not wait to tell her the wonderful news. But he found Kaikeyi in tears!

"What is the matter, my dear?" he asked in a voice full of concern. "Are you ill? Has anybody said anything to hurt you?"

The queen made no reply. The king's anxiety grew greater. "Tell me, why are you in tears? Who has dared to insult you? What is it you desire? Whatever your wish is, that shall be fulfilled. Don't you know my powers as king?" So prattled the poor innocent king. And even as he talked he fell into the snare.

"Kaikeyi, I promise you, you shall have what you want. I beg of you to dry your tears. Here, let me see that lovely face of yours." So saying the king lifted her chin with his fingers.

Kaikeyi felt emboldened at his words. "Will you really do as I wish?" she asked.

"Can you doubt it? How can you even ask such a thing? I promise you, in the name of my best beloved Rama, I shall fulfil all that you ask of me. Only stop crying. I cannot bear to see you so." As he spoke the king took his wife's hands lovingly into his own.

The queen began to speak with great cunning. "Do you remember granting me two boons. . . long ago? Will you give them to me now?"

"Why, of course I shall. Granted," replied the unsuspecting king.

"In that case, this is what I wish. Let Bharata be crowned king. And send Rama away to the forest, there to live as an exile for fourteen years," said the queen, not in the least bit ashamed of her demands.

The king could not believe his ears. He was stunned into silence by Kaikeyi's impossible wishes. Had he heard right? Was he awake or was it all a bad dream? Was it his dear Kaikeyi who asked such things of him? Did she not know that without Rama he could not live? No. She must have been joking. Presently, she would tell him that it was all a bit of fun. He looked up into her face. One look convinced him that she was quite serious. He had made his promise and she was going to force him to keep it. The realization of this struck him like a mortal blow. King Dasaratha of Ayodhya, the famous hero who had once helped the gods, fell down in a dead swoon. When he came to again, he looked at Kaikeyi with angry scorn.

"Are you crazy, Kaikeyi that you ask such things of me? Don't you know that I live for Rama? Do you want to kill me? And what is more, do you think that my noble Bharata, who loves Rama so much, will agree to take the crown from him?"

Kaikeyi laughed in reply. "King, I only know you made me a promise. Do you want to break it?"

"But Kaikeyi, you yourself have told me so often that you love Rama as much as Bharata. Why have you changed thus?"

"I only know this . . . that Bharata should be king and Rama should be exiled," the queen repeated firmly and then tightened her lips. It was really surprising, the way she had hardened her heart.

The king wept; he sobbed; he begged; but Kaikeyi remained unmoved. Where was the sweet lovable Kaikeyi of old? The king wondered. One evil thought has changed her so much! She had now brought calamity to the whole house of Ikshvaku.

"Kaikeyi, how can you do this to Rama?" the old king started to plead again. "What harm has he done you? He has always loved and served you as a mother. Why must you send him away? I beg of you on my bended knees, let Rama stay. Bharata can have the kingdom if you so desire but don't send Rama away. I shall die if I can't see him. Please, Kaikeyi, grant me this one prayer."

Kaikeyi preserved a cold silence. Fear had turned her heart to stone. She was not moved by the pitiful sight of the king in torment. She felt that if Rama stayed behind, it would be she who would live to see other torments. He must go, at all costs.

Seeing her attitude, the old man fell back, weeping and moaning. He had made his promise. In his family, they would rather die than break a promise.

It was Kaikeyi who sent for Rama, for the king was prostrate with grief and unable to move.

While Rama was on his way, the king again begged Kaikeyi to think of what she was doing. "I have given you my kingdom, Kaikeyi. Imagine so and in your greatness of heart return it to Rama. Yours shall be a noble gesture. The world will praise you for helping me to keep my promise and at the same time playing fair. Do so, my dearest queen," he cried. But Kaikeyi was adamant. At the sight of her cold hard face, the king lost courage and swooned again in grief.

When Rama arrived the king's sobs rose to his throat and choked him. He could not say anything beyond repeating his name.

Rama was aghast at the sight of the king in sorrow and the queen standing aloof from him. Had he done or said anything to cause his parents sorrow? Why were they in such a state? Rama bowed to Kaikeyi and asked, "Why is father lying thus? What has happened? Why has he turned his face away from me? Have I done anything wrong? Has anybody else dared to displease him? Is he ill? I am here ready to do his bidding".

These noble words moved Dasaratha to deep sighs. But he could not speak. Kaikeyi spoke for him. "Your father is unhappy. He promised me two boons. But having granted them he is now unwilling to fulfil them. Rama, you must help him to keep his word".

"Certainly, mother. Tell me what I must do and I shall obey".

"Your father promised the throne to Bharata and agreed to send you away to the forest for fourteen years. Having done so, he is now afraid to tell you about it. He wants to withdraw his words. Think what that will mean. The king of Ayodhya breaking his word!"

Rama replied, "Father need not worry. I shall go. Is this all he wanted of me? Why didn't he tell me so himself. I am happy Bharata is to have the crown. I shall go to the forest as father desires with a glad heart."

It was Kaikeyi's turn to be surprised. Although she knew Rama, she had not been sure how far he would sacrifice himself.

"I truly admire you, Rama," she said. "Your fame will live for ever in the minds of men. Go now and quickly prepare for exile."

"Is father still wondering whether I would go?" asked Rama.

Dasaratha had heard all that passed between the queen and Rama, but he was unable to speak or move. He only murmured Rama's name.

"The king is tired and cannot speak. Go, Rama, and get ready," Kaikeyi said.

Rama gave his father a loving look. "Father, be at peace. I shall help you to keep your word." With those words he left. Rama went holding his head high. Such was his fortitude, that neither promise of crown nor threat of exile moved him. On both occasions his face bore the same calm, sweet smile, says the poet Valmiki.

# Chapter Five

When Rama came out of the sad presence of the king, he found the streets full of happy, laughing crowds. The town had gone utterly gay and abandoned itself to complete merriment. Rama was to be crowned! What a great occasion! Women and children were clad in gay robes. Festoons and flags obscured the light. The streets were strewn with flowers. The fragrance of sandalwood and rose-water filled the air. Every house wore a festive look.

As he made his way through the crowd, Rama saw all this but made no move to show that anything was wrong. He walked on calmly with a steady stride. Not so Lakshmana, who walked behind him. His face was red with anger. His hand was on his bow. He looked as if he might burst into a storm of rage at any moment.

Kausalya was in the midst of rejoicings, when Rama came and told her the news. She broke down completely, unable to stand the sudden shock.

At the sight of her grief, Lakshmana burst out. "Old fool," he cried, forgetting the king was his father. "Old idiot, has he lost his senses to send Rama away thus? What crime has Rama done to deserve such a punishment? The blithering dotard is like clay in Kaikeyi's hands. He must be made to see reason. I do not like your submissiveness, Rama. I for one won't stand for this. There is a limit. Command me and I shall destroy Dasaratha's army single handed. You shall be crowned King of Kosala."

Rama raised his hand to stop Lakshmana's torrent of words. He smiled at his fiery words.

"Dear brother, put away your bow. Don't I know you would gain for me not one but hundreds of kingdoms? But I cannot go against my father's word. He has promised the crown to Kaikeyi and so it must be. Would you have me break my promise? I told Kaikeyi I would go into exile."

Lakshmana, however, could not bear the thought of Rama in exile. He felt his brother was weak in giving in to Kaikeyi. He argued long with him but Rama was firm. "Lakshmana, I must keep my word. Please do not try to stop me," he said.

At this, tears sprang into Lakshmana's eyes and he said to Rama, "If you must go, take me with you, for I cannot live without you." As Lakshmana was dearer to Rama than his own life, how could he refuse him?

"Take me too," cried the queen Kausalya, almost bereft of her senses. Rama consoled her with many words of love. "You must stay back and look after my father. He needs your care more than ever, now that he is unhappy. He is old and cannot bear the parting," he said to his mother. The queen let him go reluctantly. Her mother's heart was sore at the thought of his exile.

Rama left his weeping mother to go to Sita. How was he to tell her the news? How would she take it? Would she agree to stay behind? What a lonely life hers would be! With a heavy heart he entered her chamber. As soon as Sita saw Rama, she knew something had gone wrong.

"What has happened, my lord? Why do you look so grave?" she asked him. He told her.

"Dear Sita, please look after yourself and don't worry when I am away. Bharata who loves me and knows how I adore you will look after you with his very life. You, in your turn, must look on him as a brother and be happy he will be king. My mother will be most unhappy without me. Console her as best as you can."

At these words the gentle princess trembled like a leaf. Her eyes grew dim with tears.

"Alas! Does my Rama wish to leave his Sita behind? Does he not care for her any more?" she asked in reproach.

"My dear, it is because I love you so much that I want to spare you the troubles of exile. Have you any idea at all of what life in the forest will be like? Have you thought of the dark nights, the wild beasts and the rough, thorny paths? How can a princess like you, who has always had the softest of beds, sleep on the hard ground? How will you walk the stony ways with your delicate bare feet? You must stay here Sita, and I promise you, I shall hurry back as soon as the fourteen years are over."

"Wild beasts! Dark nights! Thorny paths!" Sita laughed proudly. "Do you think, dear Rama, I shall be afraid of them when you are with me? Why should I fear the wild animals when you are by my side? I don't care how hard life may be; I must come with you. Please . . . oh please . . . don't refuse me. I cannot live without you."

Who could refuse Sita's soft pleading? Not Rama. He smiled tenderly and, taking her in his arms, he said, "I too cannot bear to leave you behind, dear Sita, and I said so only because I feared, for a moment, it might be too much for you. Get ready then and prepare yourself for a long journey."

Sita's face shone with happiness. With a glad heart, she got ready to go. She gave away all that she had to the poor and clad herself in simple clothes.

Meanwhile, Lakshmana went to say goodbye to his mother. Sumitra wisely concealed her sorrow. She spoke to her son in a steady voice. "Go, my son, and may good luck attend you. You are lucky to be able to serve Rama. Regard Sita as your mother, love Rama as you do your father and you will find the forest as delightful as your home in Ayodhya. Be happy, dear child, and may God bless you."

Sumitra's cheerful words were very comforting to Lakshmana.

The news that Rama was to be exiled spread like wild fire all over the town. The shock shook the city out of its happy mood. Gone were the gaiety, the happy laughs and the trumpet calls. Instead an air of deep gloom settled in. Women and children and even grown men wept when they heard the news. What an end to what promised to be the brightest day in their lives! They stood about in groups whispering sadly. Many were heard to curse Kaikeyi and some blamed the old king. The flags hung in abandoned desolation and the streets wore a look of melancholy. Even the trees drooped and the birds above flew in silent sorrow.

Inside the palace, in his dark bedchamber, the king lay lamenting and sighing into his pillow. His voice calling out to Rama hardly rose above a whisper. Queen Kausalya, too, lay weeping in her palace. Only Kaikeyi was busy, seeing to the arrangements for the exile.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were ready to leave. They wore the barks of trees as the sages in the forest do. Lakshmana carried a few things they would need for their life in the jungle—things like spades and pickaxes. Both brothers carried their bows and arrows, armour and other weapons.

The people watched them from the house-tops, as they went to Dasaratha's palace to bid him a last farewell. "Look at them," they cried, "how proudly they walk! What a noble look Rama has! Not a tear, not a protest. . . There he goes as if he is walking to his throne! Has the king lost all his senses to drive away such a son? What will become of us when he is gone? Who will protect us against the wicked Kaikeyi? Let us go with him. . . Come, follow him. . ." So, crying aloud, the crowds of Ayodhya followed Rama as he went along the streets.

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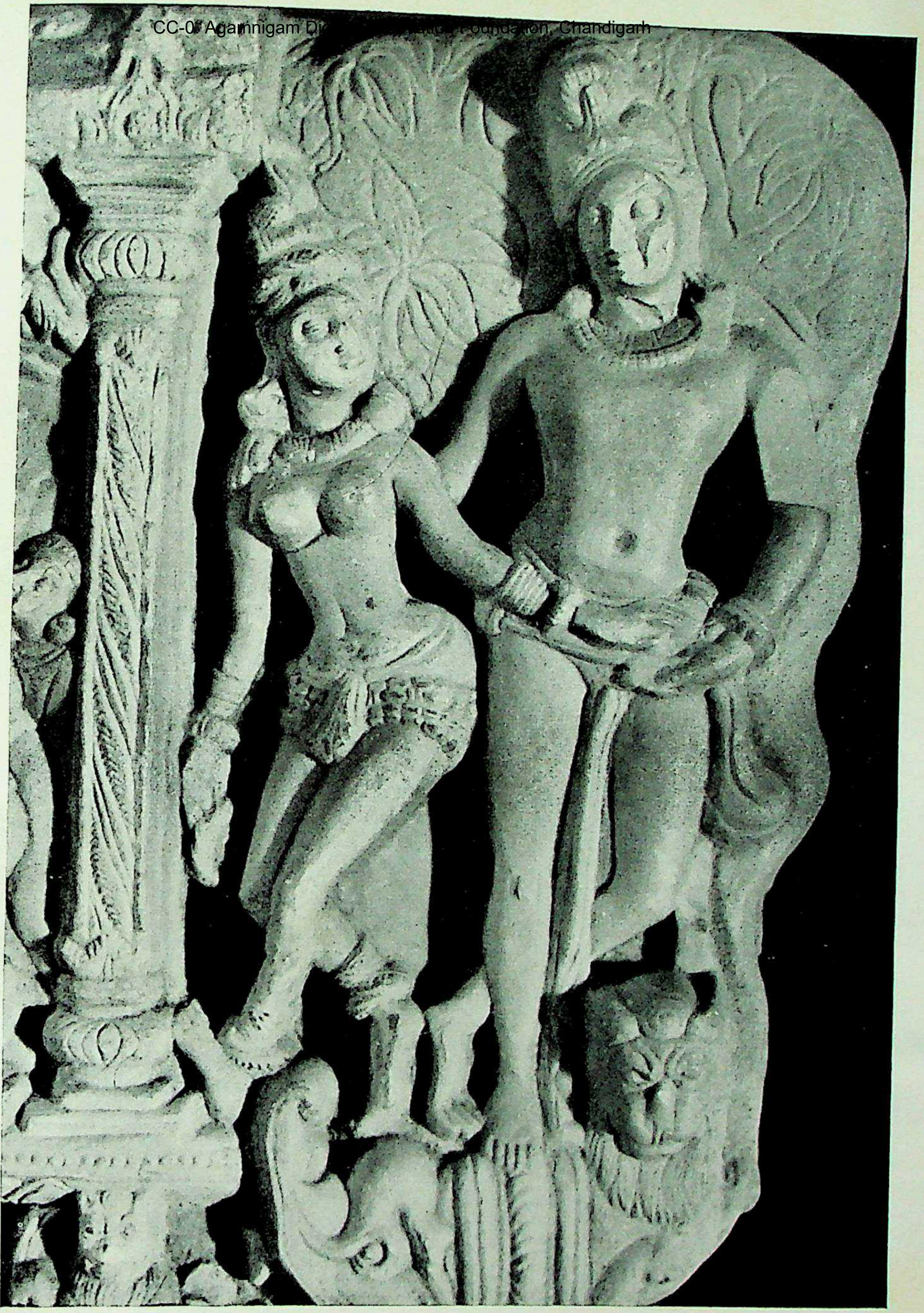
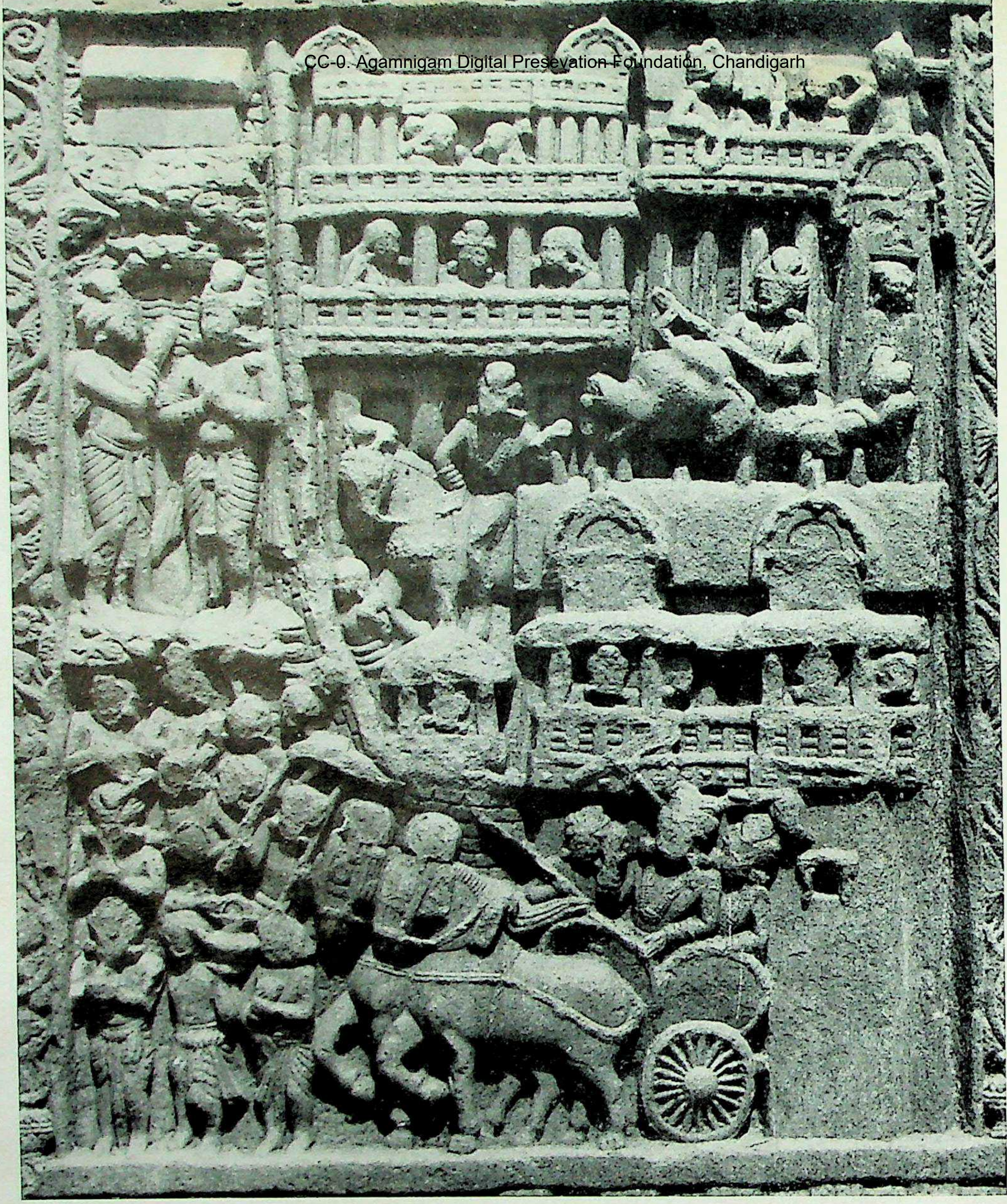


15. "Alas! Does my Rama wish to leave his Sita behind?"



16. The people of Ayodhya stood around the chariot with tear-stained faces, unwilling to part with their prince.

Rama entered Dasaratha's palace. At the sight of his son the king made as if to get up, but he could not move. He wished to spring forward, embrace Rama, and keep him for ever in his arms. But alas! he could not even speak. His tongue seemed tied. Only his eyes spoke and tears rolled down his cheeks.

"Father, I have come to take leave of you," said Rama.

"My son," whispered Dasaratha. "I am helpless, tied down by my promise. But you are free, you are strong, and you have support. Disown me and take the kingdom by force."

Rama shook his head sadly. "Father, you yourself can reign for many years to come. Do so. Meanwhile, send for Bharata, so that he may help you in the task."

When the king heard this firm reply of Rama, he lost all hopes. "All this was not my doing; you must believe that," he said in pleading tones.

"Father, do not grieve and do not worry. I think we shall enjoy this change. Even Sita is looking forward to life in the forest."

The old king beckoned to his minister, Sumantra, who was standing nearby. "Please arrange for a division of the army to go with Rama and Sita to protect them in exile," said the king.

On hearing these words Kaikeyi boiled up in anger. "What is all this? Are you leaving my son a kingdom denuded of its army?" she cried in rage.

Rama stopped all further argument by leaving at once. King Dasaratha was loth to let him go and cried out to him piteously to stop. But Rama did not look back. With firm steps he walked out. Sita and Lakshmana followed him.

"Sumantra, at least take them to the edge of the forest in my chariot," begged the king. Sumantra hurried after Rama.

Soon Rama, Sita and Lakshmana were seated in the chariot and Sumantra took the reins. But the people of Ayodhya surrounded the chariot and tried to stop it. Rama, however, gave the word to go and the chariot slowly moved off through the dense crowd. Loud wails broke out from all sides.

Dasaratha heard the commotion in the street. He ran out of the palace, crying, "Rama, Rama, please stop for a minute" . . . but the chariot drove off. As it disappeared in a cloud of dust, Dasaratha, the king of kings, fell down unconscious. The queens, Kausalya and Kaikeyi, together, raised him to his feet.

At the touch of Kaikeyi's hands, the king opened his eyes and, weak as he was, he cried, "Away, Kaikeyi! do not touch me. I do not want to see you again. . . Do you hear? Never again. Kausalya, take

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me to your palace." And that was the last the king saw of Kaikeyi.

For three days and nights, the king lay in Kausalya's palace lamenting. Kausalya tried to console him. But often, her own grief would get the better of her, and she would deride the king for his weakness. As often as she did so, she would regret her words and beg the king's forgiveness. She knew well that the king had been tricked into giving his promise to Kaikeyi and having done so, he had to keep his word.

For three sleepless nights, the king lay ill. On the fourth day, Sumantra returned alone and went in to report.

"Has Rama also returned?" asked the king eagerly, but on seeing the minister's face, he knew his son would not come back. His was but a hope against hope.

"Will he come soon?" he asked again. Sumantra merely bent his head in silence, and Dasaratha understood.

"Ah! my Rama, dear Sita, poor Lakshmana, . . ." he cried in pain. That night, broken hearted, King Dasaratha died.

## Chapter Six

Sumantra's chariot could only crawl. The people of Ayodhya hemmed in on all sides. "Please, Sumantra, be kind, don't take away our gentle prince," they begged of him. But Sumantra could not stop. He had Rama's orders to move.

Presently, as the chariot gained in speed, Rama saw the townspeople following him in large numbers. He stopped the chariot and turned back to meet them. "Kind friends, I know your affection for me. I am touched at the concern you show. But you must not follow me. Go back to Ayodhya and welcome Bharata as your ruler. He is good, brave and noble. I know he will protect you and care for you as much as I would have. Go back....I beg of you."

The good people refused to return. They stood there with tear-stained faces, unwilling to part with their prince. They insisted on walking with him into the thick, wooded jungle. As the long shadows of twilight descended, they reached the banks of the river Tamasa. Rama decided to spend the night there. The horses were unharnessed and left to graze. The people stretched their tired limbs on the river bank. Lakshmana made a soft bed of grass for Rama and Sita. At last, at the end of a long and tiring day they lay down to rest.

Rama woke up Sumantra at dawn and asked him to yoke the horses. "Let us be on our way before the people get up," he said to him. "Look at them—poor things. They are fast asleep after that long trudge from Ayodhya. They love me dearly and have come all this way in the hope of persuading me to go back. I cannot bear to pain them. So let us go while they are asleep."

As they drove away, Rama asked Sumantra to cross and recross the river at several places and go towards Ayodhya for a bit, before speeding towards the forest. In this manner, he hoped to make the people believe that he had gone back to Ayodhya. He wished them to return there soon.

And sure enough, they did conclude that. When the citizens of Ayodhya awoke and found the princes gone, they searched all over for them. Soon, they discovered the hoof prints of the horses going towards the capital, and thinking Rama was already back home, they followed gleefully. Alas, for them! Ayodhya was bereft, not only of Rama but also of Dasaratha, that king of kings.

In the meantime, Sumantra's chariot took the princes to the banks of the Ganga.

There lived nearby a hunter-king called Guha, who ruled that part of the country. He was a friend of King Dasaratha. He welcomed them with open arms but was surprised to see the princes there in the garb of rishis. Rama told him all that had happened.

"Stay here with me, Rama, please do. My kingdom, my riches, my life are all yours, to do as you like. Stay here," he begged.

Rama was touched by his friendship. "I know how much you care for me," he replied, "but I cannot stay. I promised Kaikeyi that in my exile I would live the life of a hermit. Please get me a boat to cross the river at dawn." Guha nodded sadly.

Rama and Sita slept under a tree that night while Lakshmana kept vigil. Guha joined him in this and together they talked of the man they adored most in the world.

Then Lakshmana told his friend how much his thoughts were with those at home. "My mother must be most unhappy, though she pretended to be very brave in my presence. I am glad Satrughna will soon be there to take care of her and console her. But Kausalya, that gentle lady, whose life is Rama, and my poor father, may die of this separation," Lakshmana sighed. "Who can replace Rama in their minds?"

Guha tried hard to comfort his friend.

The next day the three travellers said goodbye to their friends and got into the boat.

When Sumantra came to take leave of Rama with a heavy heart, Rama told him, "Go back to Ayodhya, Sumantra, and cheer up the king as best as you can. Tell Queen Kaikeyi that I have kept my promise and give good news of us to our mothers, Kausalya and Sumitra. To my brother, Bharata, when he returns to Ayodhya, say that I leave my father and mother to his care."

"Had Bharata been there, he would never have allowed Rama to go, nor would Kaikeyi have dared to ask for such boons," thought Sumantra to himself. Aloud he said, "How can I go back? How can I face the king and the people of Ayodhya? Think of the welcome I shall get. Let me stay and serve you. These horses will carry you over the rough forest paths. Look, how eager they are to do so."

"Sumantra, I know how much all this pains you. But you must go back and give news of me to the king. Also Kaikeyi must know that I have really gone. You must go back. Please," ordered Rama.

As Rama's boat sailed away, Sumantra and Guha looked on, their eyes dim with tears. Guha returned to his kingdom. As for Sumantra, he sadly mounted his chariot and turned homewards. "Ayodhya without Rama!" he sighed and the very horses shed hot tears.

When they reached the other bank, Rama got down and helped Sita out. The three then began to find their way through the thick jungle. Lakshmana went ahead, so that he might warn them if he saw any danger. Sita walked in the middle. And Rama brought up the rear, to protect her from behind.

Sita, however, did not seem worried at all. This kind of life was new to her and she rather enjoyed it. Having always lived in palaces, it thrilled her to see Nature in its wild state. Rama pointed out to her little things of interest and told her the names of the trees and the birds. She was in high spirits. The beautiful forest was a source of continuous interest to her. Everything astonished her. She laughed merrily. The tinkle of her silvery laughter mingled with the chirping of the birds. They walked on without a care. The two princes, of course, kept a sharp look out for danger of any kind.

Once in the jungle, Rama had time to think of the events of the past three days. Until then he had been too keen on keeping his promise to Kaikeyi to consider anything else. Now that he was actually in exile, his thoughts turned to his poor parents. It gave him intense pain to think of what they must be suffering. How had Kausalya survived the parting? His father must be too ill to look after her. Could Bharata have arrived? If not, woe betide the old king. Kaikeyi could not treat him kindly. Rama was now truly unhappy as he thought of his parents. "Lakshmana, why don't you go back to Ayodhya and look after them?" Rama asked. "Bharata is most true but will he be able to stand firm against Kaikeyi?"

"Dear Rama, calm yourself. I am sure Bharata is by our father's side, trying his best to lessen his pain. And I am certain that our mothers are now under his loving care. Please do not worry." With such words Lakshmana tried to bring peace to Rama's mind. Gradually, his anxiety quietened down.

After some days, they reached the pretty hill of Chitrakuta. The beauty of the place captured Sita's heart. It was spring and the trees were fresh and green. The birds twittered amidst the sunlit leaves. Nearby flowed the Malyavati river, chattering its way over a rocky bed. Rama thought Sita would like to live there, in those lovely surroundings.

So Lakshmana built a little hut on a gentle slope and the three lived there in peace. The blue mountains in the distance, the colourful forest and the singing waterfalls delighted Sita. Rama loved to see her happily flitting about amidst the wild flowers.

# Chapter Seven

When King Dasaratha died suddenly Ayodhya was without a protector. The wise Vasishta realized that this was not good for the kingdom. Enemies might choose this time to invade the country. The people might also feel insecure and uncared for. He decided to send for Bharata without delay. Accordingly, messengers rode in haste to bring him back. Bharata was astonished to receive these urgent summons. He did not know what had happened, for the sage had wisely instructed the messengers not to tell him any of the news.

All the same Bharata left at once. He felt all was not well. He had not liked the sudden coming of the riders from Ayodhya. Whatever the trouble, Dasaratha would not have sent for him thus. It was most unlike him. And what trouble could there be which Dasaratha could not face with Rama by his side? All the way home, Bharata had a sense of foreboding. He and Satrughna rode day and night, so anxious were they to learn quickly that all was well with Ayodhya.

As he entered the famous city, Bharata's fears increased. He was puzzled by the deep silence of the usually gay and noisy streets. A few stragglers who passed looked depressed and unhappy. There was none of the usual bustle in the busy market places. Everything appeared dull and gloomy. The city looked as if it was in mourning.

The prince was now really frightened. Had anything happened to his father or Rama? He flew to his father's palace. No welcoming salutes greeted him. The palace looked bare and silent. He rushed to his mother. Perhaps his father was with her.

As Bharata darted in, Kaikeyi rose from her seat and fondly embraced her son.

"How are you, my dear? Did you have a good journey? How is grandfather?" she enquired. Bharata hardly heard her. "Where is father? I can't find him anywhere. And he is not here either. Where has he gone?"

"Your father, dear son, was a great king. He was an ideal ruler. He reigned long and well. He was generous, good and full of charity.

He protected the poor and worshipped the gods. While in this world he strove to do his duty. And now he will have the reward for all his meritorious deeds. Your father, boy, is in heaven. He will enjoy, for long periods, the joys of the higher worlds."

Dead! Bharata was stunned by the news. Father dead? How? Why? When? Why hadn't they sent for him? What ailed him? How long had he been ill? Bharata cried aloud in a fit of grief. "Alas! I was not fortunate enough to be with him in his last hours! When I think of the deep love and tender care he used to bestow on me, I cannot bear this pain of parting. What a father I had, mother, and how easily I lost him. And he went without a word for me, mother. Tell me, did he speak of me?...Did he leave a message?...At least Rama was there to minister to his needs. He was lucky to be able to hear father's last words. Tell me, mother, what were father's last words to me?"

"Your father died longing to see Rama. His last words were of Rama," replied Kaikeyi.

Bharata was surpried. "Why, mother, wasn't Rama there? Where had he gone?" he asked.

"Your father had exiled him to the forest," said Kaikeyi.

Bharata was even more mystified.

"Why was Rama exiled? What crime had he committed? Rama is incapable of crime!" he said in utter amazement.

"Rama had done nothing wrong. Seeing the king preparing for Rama's coronation, it was I who asked him for two boons, and having bound him by a promise, insisted that he should exile Rama and give the throne to you. My dear Bharata, I did all this for your sake. The kingdom of Kosala is now yours. The people are waiting to receive you as king. Crown yourself and reign in happy content." There was no shame or regret in Kaikeyi's face as she spoke.

Bharata was aghast. It was only then that the full import of what had happened dawned on him.

"You forced the king to exile Rama so that I might have the crown? And the king died of a broken heart because he had to send away his beloved son? You stand there and tell me this and you are not ashamed to do so? . . . How could you? . . . Do you realize what you have done? You have committed a horrible sin. You have taken the crown away from Rama, the eldest, to whom it is due. What an injustice! How did you dare? And you killed my father. Did you think I would ever dream of accepting the kingdom? Did you not know how much I love Rama? Did you think I would care to claim what is his? You will never see your hope fulfilled. I shall not be crowned. I swear to you, I will never sit on the throne. I will fetch Rama back and crown him king. What a horribly wicked woman you are! I shall not call you mother any more. How can I, when you so heartlessly killed my father and drove away my brother? And to think you did it for my sake!"

"Bharata, I did it to bring you happiness. Don't you understand?" pleaded Kaikeyi.

But nothing could stop Bharata's anger. He raved against her and swore to bring Rama back.

"I shall go to the depths of the jungle and bring Rama back. If he insists that one of us should be in exile to fulfil father's words, I shall be that one," cried the noble Bharata.

Hearing Bharata had arrived, Kausalya and Sumitra hurried to him. Kausalya hoped he might help to end her sorrow. Great sobs shook Bharata when he saw Rama's mother. "Alas! dear mother, I hope you do not think I am a party to all this," he cried in pain.

In truth, Kausalya had had a little doubt in her mind. She had wondered whether Bharata would be tempted by the crown. But when she saw his tears and heard his words, her fears melted away.

"What a noble son you are, my Bharata. What if Rama is away? I feel as happy today as if he is back because you are with me," cried Kausalya in great thankfulness.

Then Bharata told her of his plans to bring Rama back to Ayodhya. Rama's mother was overjoyed. "My son, long is the list of illustrious names in your family. But none could have been like you—you who have refused the crown that has been given you," she said.

Valmiki has sung of Bharata's noble gesture in flowing verse.

When the citizens of Ayodhya heard that Bharata was back, they came to him and asked him to be crowned king. Bharata refused; he caused the assembly to meet and swore before them that he would bring Rama back. "Noble men of Ayodhya, you know well that it is the tradition in our family for the eldest to rule. While Rama, the eldest, is alive, how can I be king? It is true that Rama has gone into exile to keep my father's word. But I shall go to him and persuade him to come back and be crowned. People of Ayodhya, I shall stay in the forest for fourteen years as a hermit to fulfil my father's words and to pay for my mother's heartless deed!"

At these words, those assembled clapped and cheered wildly. Loud acclamations declaring Bharata the noblest of the Ikshvakus almost brought the palace roofs down. Bharata, unable to contain his feelings any longer, broke down and cried in the open assembly.

After that Bharata knew no peace. Day and night he made plans to go and fetch Rama. He collected a large army of men who knew the jungles and rivers well, so that he might be able to search more easily for his brother. He consulted Vasishta and other wise men. Finally, he decided to leave at the head of this large army. The three queens of Dasaratha went with him. Perhaps he took Kaikeyi in the hope that if she, herself, withdrew the boons she had demanded of the old king, Rama might return.

When Guha, the hunter-king, saw a large army on the other side of the Ganga, he was amazed. Who could it be? His men brought the news that it was Bharata. What? Was Bharata pursuing his brother to his forest resort? Was he so vengeful that he wanted to blot out Rama completely? Guha went to see for himself.

In the distance, he discerned King Dasaratha's flag. It was Bharata. "Let me go and meet him and I shall see for myself what he is up to," said Guha to himself. He crossed over and, meeting Bharata, did him the honours due to a king.

"I have come to discover Rama's whereabouts," said Bharata without much ado. "Can you and your men help?"

Guha readily agreed. "But, pardon me," he said, "I feel a bit worried. Why have you brought this huge army with you? I hope your intentions are good."

At these words of Guha, Bharata's shame and sorrow deepened. "Alas! that I should be suspected thus of treachery to Rama! What have I come to?" he lamented. Then he added in a tone of reproach, "Believe me, king of hunters, I have come to find Rama and beg him to go back to Ayodhya. I shall know no peace until I have settled him on the throne of Kosala."

Guha was delighted to hear this. "Best of princes! Who but Rama's brother could say such words! You are truly worthy of him. Do not fear, my men shall guide you into the forest and help you to find Rama."

That night Bharata spent with Guha, just as Rama had some time ago. Guha told him all that Rama had said and done. He pointed out to him the tree under which Rama and Sita had slept. Bharata could not sleep at all. The memory of Rama and of all that he might be undergoing, because of what his mother had done, was too painful. He spent the night weeping bitterly and bemoaning his fate.

The next morning, Guha helped Bharata's men to cross the river. Landing on the other bank, Guha pointed out the path to the hilly forest, behind. The army marched on. The hunter-king went with the prince. On their way, they asked the rishis they met if they had seen Rama. The rishis showed them the way to Chitrakuta where Rama was. Bharata and his army marched towards Chitrakuta.

Meanwhile, Rama and Sita were living in Chitrakuta in great happiness. They often bathed in the river Malyavati. Rama admired the swans and the lotuses. Turning to Sita, he would say with deep tenderness, "But what is their beauty in comparison to yours?" Sita drank in the lovely scenery. She felt she was as happy there as in Ayodhya.

Rama often said, "I feel I am in Ayodhya. These jungle animals show me as much love as my dear subjects. Here is the Malyavati, flowing as grandly as our Sarayu. The roots and shoots I taste here are better than the palace sweetmeats. Above all, I have you and Lakshmana with me. What more could I need to make me happy?"

One day, as they were resting outside their cottage, they saw a cloud of dust in the distance. Lakshmana climbed up a tree to see what was the matter. Could it be some wild herd? What was his surprise when he saw a large army and Dasaratha's flag at the head of it!

"Rama, Bharata has come to fight us," he cried at once in an angry voice. "Get Sita into safety and pull out your bow."

Rama smiled. "Do you think so? Do you feel Bharata will fight us? I think he has come to offer me the crown. I know my Bharata."

"Rama, you are always too good to those who do you harm," answered Lakshmana a little sulkily.

"Wait and watch, Lakshmana. Don't act in haste. Put your arrow back in its quiver. Why do you wish to fight Bharata? Do you wish to have the crown? Let him come. I have only to ask him to give it to you, and he will do so."

Lakshmana felt a little downcast. He said. "Perhaps it is our father, come to see how we are," he ventured.

"Wait and see. Meanwhile, control your anger," advised Rama.

Along came Bharata's great army and soon the young prince was climbing the hill with great eagerness. When he reached the top he saw Rama's face, beautiful like the rising sun, in the doorway of the hut. He ran forward crying, "Rama! Rama! My Rama!"

Rama rose to meet him with open arms. Tears of joy filled Bharata's eyes. His knees trembled and before he could reach his brother, he fell down. Rama bent down and took his young brother tenderly into his arms. Lakshmana hung his head in shame.

Rama was amazed to see Bharata also dressed in the bark of trees. He too was like a hermit. Long days of fasting and sorrow had made him pale and weak. "Why are you dressed like this? How could father bear to send you too into the jungles?" Rama asked.

At this, Bharata broke down afresh and sobbing, told Rama of the king's death. Rama lowered his head in silent sorrow. Sita wept softly. By this time, Vasishta, Guha, Sumantra and the others joined them.

"Yes, father is dead, so you must come back and look after the kingdom," said Bharata firmly.

"Bharata, you should be in Ayodhya now, doing that," Rama retorted.

"Dear brother, listen to me. Father died in great sorrow because he had to send you away. My mother has suffered for what she has done. She is sorry for what has happened. For she now knows I will not be king; she also knows that I abhor her for her deeds. So she is eager to have you come home. We have all come to take you back, my mother and myself—the real culprits—and all these people who love you. Look. Your mother is here, your guru is here, your friend Guha is here. And here are the citizens of Ayodhya. Will you not make us happy?" Bharata fell down at Rama's feet.

Rama lifted him up most lovingly.

"Dear brother, I know your mind. Do not grieve. I know you do not covet the crown. I realize fully well what has happened. But a promise is always a promise. There is no going back for an Ikshvaku, once he has given his word. My father ordained the forest for me, and the crown for you. Therefore, return to Ayodhya and rule as king."

But Bharata refused to stir. He threatened to lie down and fast unto death until Rama gave in.

Rama tried in vain to change his mind. "If you must do what father ordered, why should I not stay in the forest for fourteen years and observe the vows of the hermit? Surely, that would be enough to honour father's words," argued the younger brother.

Rama smiled at his childishness. "Bharata, do as I tell you. Go back now and look after the kingdom. I, for my part, shall carry out my promise and return after fourteen years. I swear to you, I shall come back and accept your present then."

Bharata appealed to the people assembled there.

"Rama is firm in his vow. Neither you, nor any one else can shake him. It is no use trying to change his mind," they said.

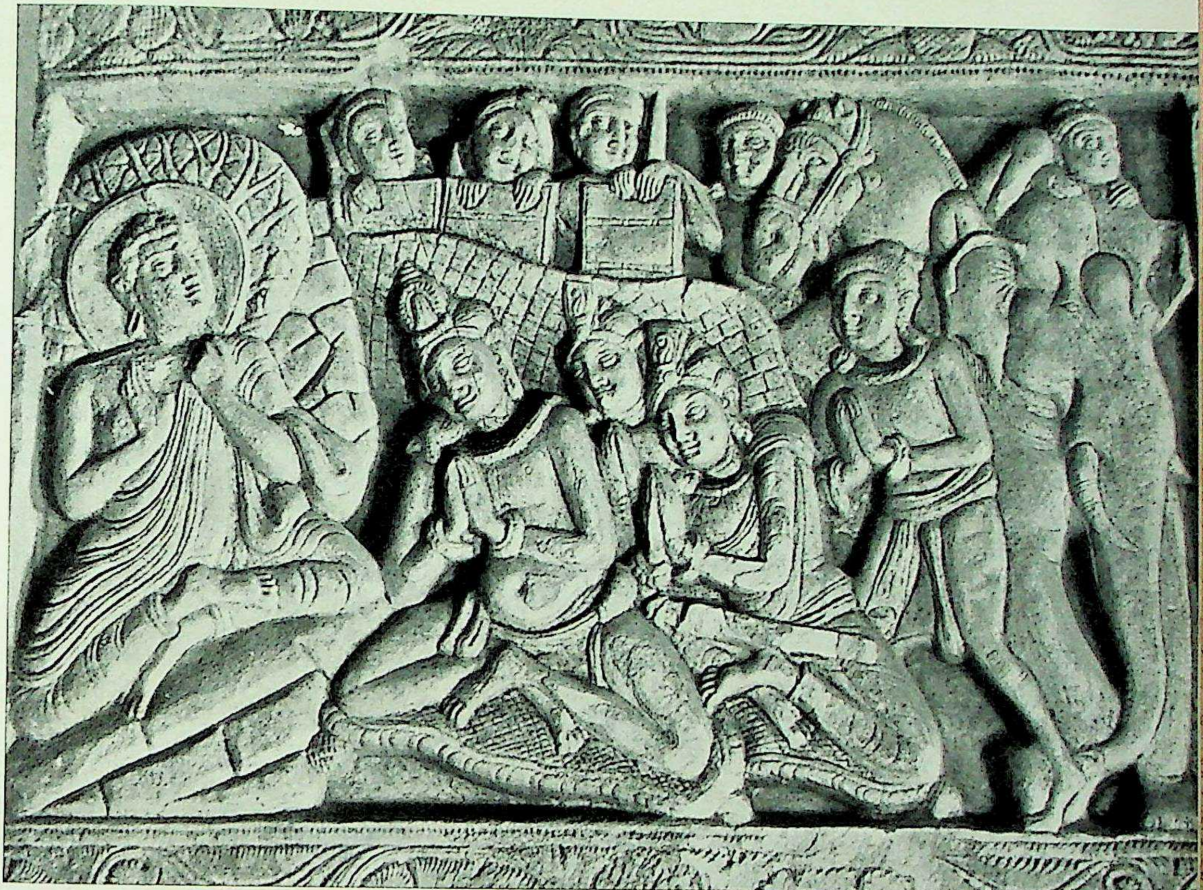
Rama looked at Bharata. "Did you hear that?" he asked his younger brother.

The sage Vasishta advised Bharata, "Take orders from Rama and rule in his stead for these fourteen years until he returns. None can blame you for being just a regent."

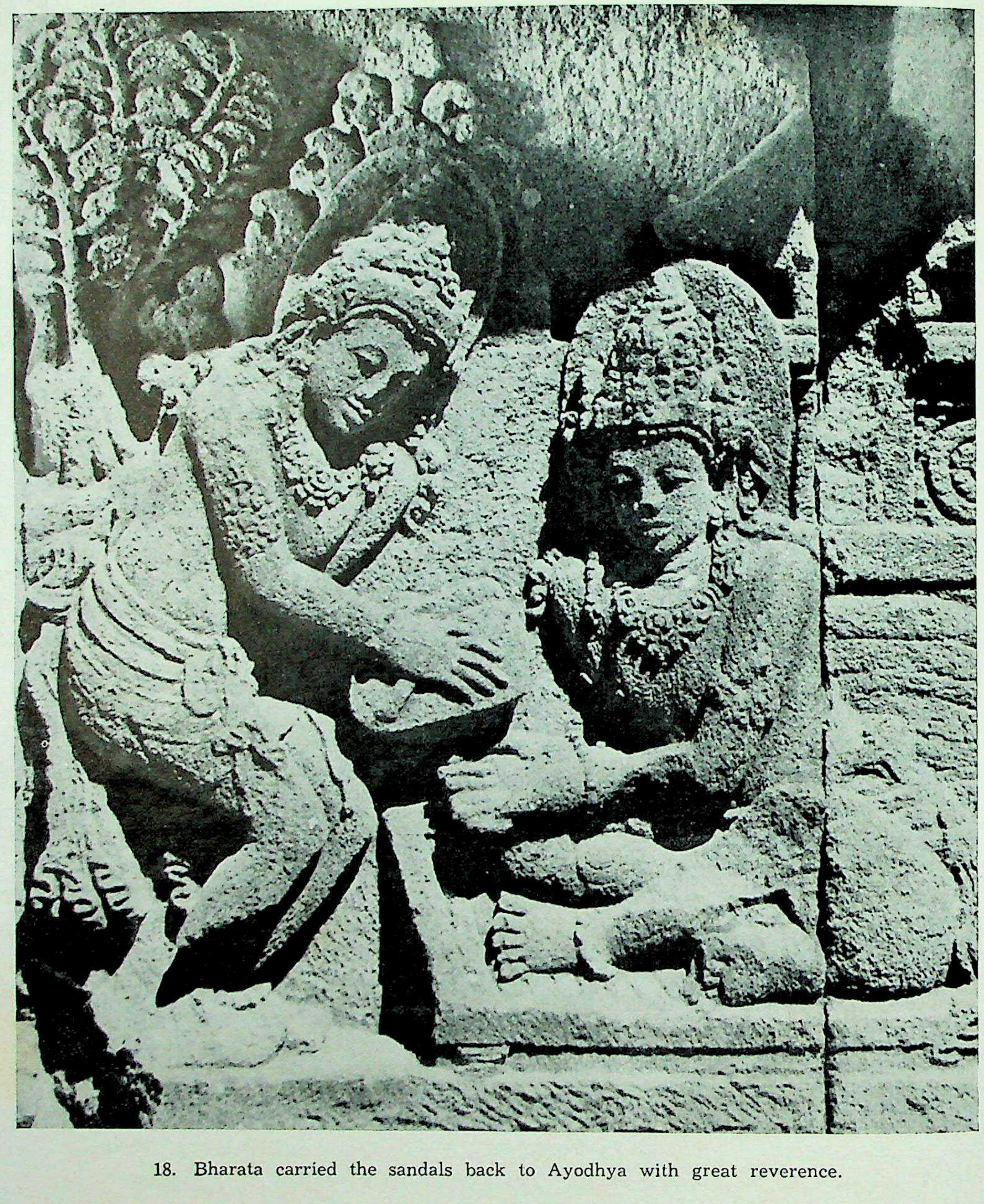
Rama hastened to approve of what the guru said. "Do so, dear Bharata."

Bharata agreed with great hesitation.

"Very well. I see that I must obey. But I shall not sit on the throne



17. "We have all come to take you back. Will you not make us happy?" Bharata fell down at Rama's feet.



18. Bharata carried the sandals back to Ayodhya with great reverence.

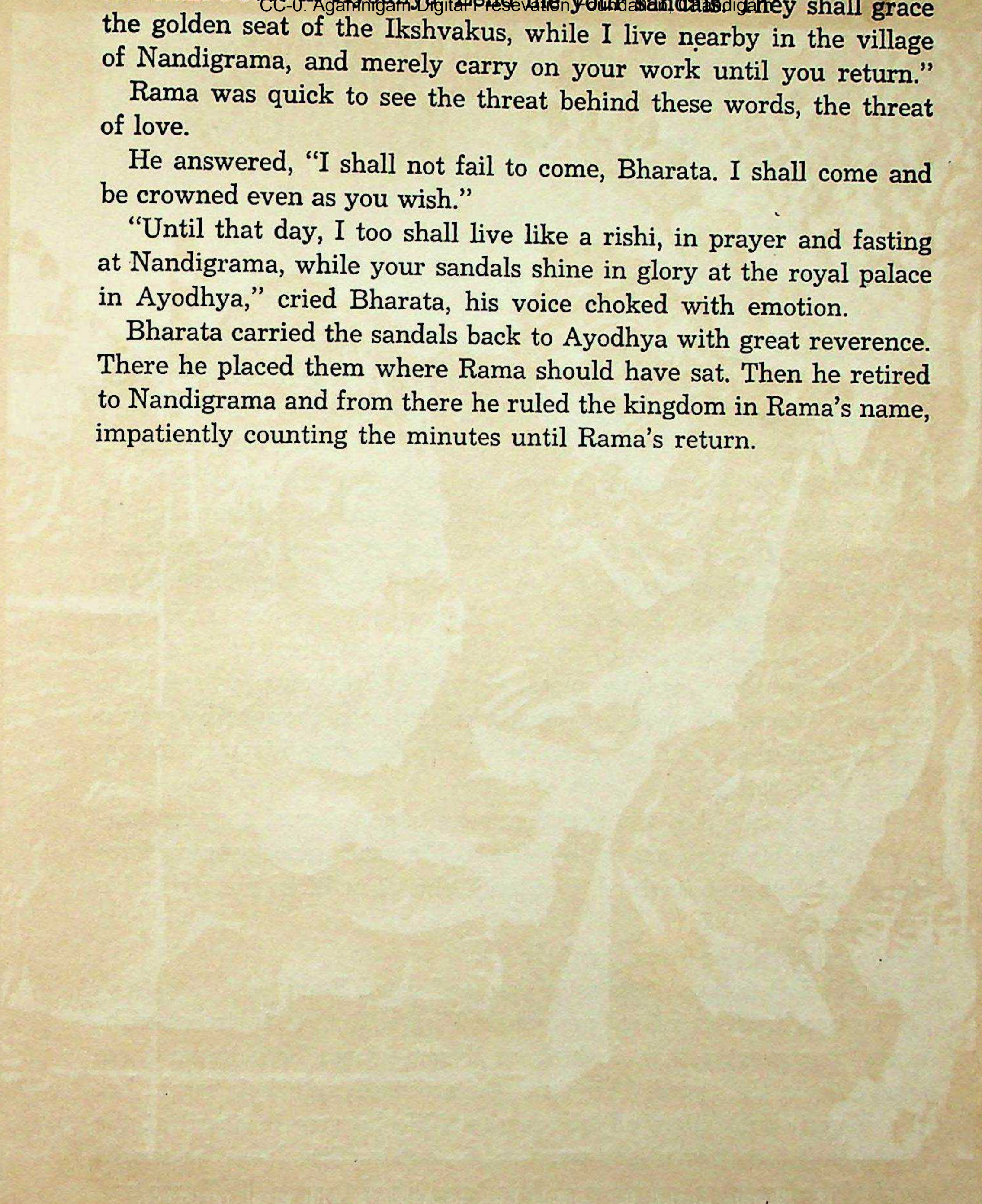
nor shall I rule in Ayodhya. Lend me your sandals. They shall grace the golden seat of the Ikshvakus, while I live nearby in the village of Nandigrama, and merely carry on your work until you return."

Rama was quick to see the threat behind these words, the threat of love.

He answered, "I shall not fail to come, Bharata. I shall come and be crowned even as you wish."

"Until that day, I too shall live like a rishi, in prayer and fasting at Nandigrama, while your sandals shine in glory at the royal palace in Ayodhya," cried Bharata, his voice choked with emotion.

Bharata carried the sandals back to Ayodhya with great reverence. There he placed them where Rama should have sat. Then he retired to Nandigrama and from there he ruled the kingdom in Rama's name, impatiently counting the minutes until Rama's return.



# Chapter Eight

After Bharata left, Rama's thoughts were full of his loving brothers. Everything around Chitrakuta reminded him of Bharata. Again and again he relived Bharata's fiery words; his deep love had such a divine quality about it. He thought often of the sad and moving scene of their parting, of his mother in tears and of Satrughna in grief.

"It is better we move from here," Rama said to Lakshmana. "I seem to see Bharata's face everywhere. Let us go somewhere else."

So they moved, even though they had been very happy there. They took leave of the rishis living around them and with their usual carefree air, entered the great forest of Dandakaranya. They were in search of another dwelling place. Now, Dandakaranya was full of ashrams, where many famous sages lived. Rama thought he would like to visit them one by one. He did so, making his way slowly through the forest.

One day, while they were on their way to an ashram, they encountered a terrible rakshasa called Virata. His appearance was so ferocious that Sita was terrified. Suddenly, the giant lifted her up in his huge arms.

Sita cried out to Rama for help.

"Quick Lakshmana, Sita is in danger," cried Rama.

The two brothers rained arrows on Virata. But, to their astonishment, they went astray, looking as if some force had drawn them away. Again they tried. This time, the arrows found their mark, but the demon shook them off like feathers. He became incensed at the boldness of these two pigmy warriors. So putting Sita down, he caught hold of the brothers, one in each hand and lifted them aloft. Rama and Lakshmana seized this chance. Quickly drawing their swords, they went on cutting deep into his flesh until the huge rakshasa was rolled to the ground mortally wounded. They dug a deep hole and buried the giant in it even while he was half alive. Thus ended Virata, the first demon to fall to the sword of Rama.

When the rishis of Dandakaranya heard that Rama had killed

Virata, they collected about him in joyous groups. "What luck for us to have you here, Rama. You have destroyed one of our mortal enemies. You do not know how these demons prey on us. We are easy game for them. Stay here and protect us," they cried.

Rama was touched by their appeal. He promised to stay and help them in their distress. Sita did not like Rama giving his word to the rishis in this manner. She tried to tell Rama that they had come to the forest in retirement and therefore he should not take on the task of a ruling king, that of protecting people in distress. But Rama had been moved to pity. He had promised to help and there was no way out of it. Besides, Rama did want to help them very much. He could never refuse those in dire need.

However, they spent the next ten years wandering about the great forest of Dandakaranya. Everywhere they went, the rishis welcomed them and gave them a home. What more could they wish for than the protective arm of the prince, Rama?

With Rama's love and Lakshmana's care, Sita flourished like the flame of the forest. So they continued to live without a care, staying a month in one hermitage, a few weeks in another and some months in a third and so on.

Then at last in the tenth year of their exile Sita wished for a cottage of her own. By this time they had reached Panchavati, a lovely spot on the banks of the Godavari, and Sita decided she would like to live there. With his usual quickness, Lakshmana built her a hut. Sita adored the place. It was full of deep green foliage. Creepers grew round the cottage. Wild flowers spread a riot of colours amidst the grass around their dwelling. The birds cooed in the trees, inviting Sita to join in their song. Herds of deer grazed in the vicinity. The Godavari was not far off. Sita hardly knew how time went. Her day was full, feeding the deer, plucking the flowers, watching the birds or bathing in the river. Lakshmana was ever ready with help and Rama was always by her side.

Whenever the brothers were away to fetch food or water, the old vulture Jatayu kept her company. Jatayu was a friend of King Dasaratha. As soon as he heard the princes were in Panchavati, he hurried to meet them and offered them his humble services. He made his home nearby and was constantly attending on the princes of Ayodhya.

Now it happened that Ravana's younger brothers Khara and Dushana also lived near Panchavati. So did his sister Surpanaka.

One day Surpanaka happened to pass by Rama's hut. Rama was sitting with Sita outside the cottage door. His handsome form and noble bearing struck the rakshasi dumb. She stared at him in fascination. "What a wonderful creature this is! He looks perfectly divine. I do not think even Indra, King of Heaven, can match him in strength or beauty," said Surpanaka to herself. She approached him and asked him who he was. Both princes were amused by the looks of the ugly rakshasi. Rama told her why they were there.

"I am Ravana's sister. You must have heard of him. He is famous in the three worlds for his prowess. Equally powerful are his brothers Khara and Dushana who rule this forest. Tell me, would you like to come and live with us? Marry me and we shall live in a big palace, with many servants to wait on us. How can you be satisfied with this tiny puny-looking girl? Come, abandon her and follow me," said Surpanaka.

Suppressing his smile, Rama said, "This girl is already my wife. I cannot therefore marry you. Why don't you ask my brother? He appears free!" Rama looked at Lakshmana with a mischievous smile.

Surpanaka at once ran to Lakshmana. He seemed as handsome and as desirable as Rama. "Come, young man, follow me home and I shall make you happy," she said to him.

"What a fate for you, my dear. I am like a servant to yonder prince. If you marry me, you too will have to serve them," Lakshmana cried, pointing to the royal couple.

Surpanaka felt thwarted and offended. She thought the princes were reluctant to come with her because of Sita. She was the real hindrance. If only she could get rid of her, then all would be well. With a sudden feeling of wrath she sprang forward to attack Sita, spreading out her hands.

Rama stopped her, then turning to his brother, he said in a peremptory tone. "Lakshmana, no more of this fooling. Stop that woman."

Lakshmana drew his sword and quickly cut off Surpanaka's arms and nose. Then he chased her away.

The maimed rakshasi let out yells of pain. She tore through the forest, screaming as she ran. The wild animals in the forest scuttled away in terror at her approach. Hurt pride made Surpanaka furious. She was determined to take revenge. She ran to her brothers and told them what had happened. She abused them for allowing two such miserable men to live in their forest. "They insulted me," she cried, shedding tears of passion. Khara was astonished at what he heard. To think that a man, a mere man, would dare to maim his sister thus, and in his domain! How could it happen?

"Do not worry, my dear. These men will not live much longer." So saying, he sent out a dozen of his best men. He was sure that they would come back very soon, for their task was very simple. What was his surprise when there was no sign of them for some hours! He was puzzled and worried. He sent out a scout. Very soon the scout came back with lowered head and reported that all had been killed. Khara became furious and decided to lead his army into battle.

Meanwhile, Rama prepared for what was coming. He ordered Lakshmana to take Sita into one of the caves on the hillside. "I shall face them alone. You look after Sita," said he.

Carrying only his bow and a large quiver of arrows, Rama stood alone, waiting for the enemy. As they approached; arrows left Rama's bow with lightning speed. Not one missed its mark. The field was soon covered with the bodies of hundreds of rakshasas. Streams of blood ran down the slopes of Panchavati. Dandakaranya was rid of its pests.

The rishis came in great crowds to watch their deliverance. Even the gods watched the battle from above. And when it was over, they showered flowers of praise on the great hero.

To Rama, who stood triumphant and flushed with victory, came Sita and Lakshmana. Sita laid her lovely face on Rama's breast and her tears washed his wounds like a soft balm. "The sages of Dandakaranya can now live in peace," cried Lakshmana with joy.

Surpanaka flew to Lanka in terror. She did not know what to think. She felt even Ravana might be in danger and he should be warned. At the same time her hurt pride demanded vengeance. Secretly, she made up her mind that Sita should suffer. For, she thought, had it not been for her, she, Surpanaka, would now be living in happiness with Rama at Dandakaranya. In this mood, she got back to the court of her brother.

Ravana, King of Lanka, sat in splendour on his golden throne. Arrogance and satisfaction shone on his face. He had subdued the devas. They were his slaves. In the under-world everybody feared him. None dare stand against him. As for the mortals! Well they were too insignificant. He was supreme...he, Ravana, King of Lanka, master of the three worlds! Surpanaka broke in to shatter his dream.

"My brother, if you think that in the three worlds you are unconquerable, give up that thought at once," she shouted hoarsely.

Ravana was taken aback, for that was the very thought in his mind. "How dare you say such things to me, even if you are my sister?"

"Brother, have you not heard what has happened to your bravest men? Khara, Dushana and other famous warriors are lying dead in Dandakaranya. You will not believe it, but all of them were killed by just one man. A man, single-handed, has killed your brothers!

Rise, Ravana, and take vengeance! That such a thing should happen to the King of Lanka is a shame. Are you listening? Well, what are you afraid of? Why are you still here?"

As he heard these words, Ravana's anger mounted. He jumped off his throne as if he was going after Rama then and there.

Surpanaka stopped him. "Wait a minute," she said. "Don't be in such a hurry to rush into danger. Stop and think for a moment. Do you think that mere death can atone for his insults to me? I shall tell you of a better plan. Have you heard of Sita? I cannot find words to describe her beauty. She is like a lily in full bloom. The dark forest itself shines with light by her presence. Sleeping flowers burst into bloom at her sight. When I saw her I knew that she must be yours. Go and get this jewel for yourself. That will punish Rama more than death."

She saw that her words impressed Ravana. She went on to press her advantage. "Look at my face and what Rama's brother has done to it," she cried with sobs of self pity. "And why? It was for you that I suffered this and it was for you that Khara and Dushana died fighting. You boast of Lanka and of having conquered the three worlds. What is Lanka but a desert without Sita beside you on your throne?"

Ravana was now fully roused into action by anger and desire. He ordered his chariot immediately. This was a wonder vehicle which could travel on earth or fly over land and sea at will. As he went, he began to think of ways and means of enticing or capturing Sita. A cunning stratagem took shape in his mind. He remembered that Maricha was adept in changing himself into any form. Now this Maricha was none other than the son of Tataka who had been thrown into the sea by Rama's arrow. At first his humiliation had made him thirst for vengeance, but later he realized that he would not stand a chance against Rama. He had then decided to turn over a new leaf and retire to a hermitage to lead a life of prayer and penance. He was not a little surprised when his meditation was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Ravana. All the same, he warmly welcomed his king and humbly asked, "What can I do for you, my king? I am honoured by your visit."

"My name is mud," said Ravana. "The gods must be laughing at me. My power, which has so far never been questioned, is now being challenged. My valiant brothers have been killed by Rama, the prince of Ayodhya, at Dandakaranya. Everybody tells me he was alone when he accomplished this deed of wiping out a whole rakshasa army. How can I face the people of Lanka? I must find a way of getting my own back on this mere man, Rama. Merely killing him is not enough. He has heaped insults on my sister and brought dishonour to my race.

I must do something that will hurt him deeply. I have therefore thought of taking away his wife. Sita, I believe, is divine and ravishing. I shall have her for myself. Once Sita disappears, Rama is sure to lose courage and either die or run away. At any rate, in that weak state, I can surely fight and kill him."

At these words of Ravana, Maricha began to tremble. His face grew pale and his lips went dry. He thought of the day when he was thrown into the sea by Rama's arrow.

"Great king, I beseech you to think before you try to take Sita away from Rama. You do not realize how strong, how great and how brave he is!"

"Maybe. But do not forget I am Ravana, King of Lanka. Maricha, you must help me in this matter. You have great knowledge of magic charms. Change yourself into a lovely golden deer and go and play near Rama's hut. Sita is sure to ask Rama to get the deer for her. Rama will chase you. Give him a long run. During that time, I shall get Sita and take her away to Lanka."

"Rama terrifies me! I dare not face him," whispered Maricha.

"I am not asking you to face him. Just be a golden deer near Sita's hermitage. That will do. I shall do the rest." The wicked Ravana smiled at the thought of the trick he was going to play on poor Sita.

"Rama is sure to kill me."

"Well, if he shoots you, be sure to cry out for help in Rama's voice, so that Lakshmana may go to his help and leave Sita alone and to me," continued the hardhearted demon, not caring what fate awaited Maricha.

"But, king, let me advise you. . . ."

"I do not want your advice. How dare you try to teach me! Have you learnt to disobey your king?" said Ravana in a thundering voice. "I shall kill you, if you say one more word," he threatened.

Maricha now knew his end had come. He said sadly, "Yes, I would sooner die at Rama's hands than yours. Let us go."

The demon turned to him in glee. Together they left for Panchavati in Ravana's chariot.

# Chapter Nine

One day, when Rama and Sita were sitting outside their door taking the air, a beautiful golden deer flashed past them.

"Oh!" cried Sita in great delight. "What a beautiful creature. I wish you could get him for me to play with, dear Rama."

Now Rama knew that life in the forest must be very dull for Sita. He wanted to please her by getting her the little things she asked for. He therefore rose to go after the deer.

Lakshmana stopped him. "Please don't go, Rama. I fear, the deer is not real. Have you ever heard of a golden deer? There is something wrong. I feel uneasy."

"Oh, look at it, Rama. See how its coat flashes colour like a rainbow? Its eyes are gleaming like gems. Won't you get it for me? How delighted Bharata would be to see it if we were to take it back to Ayodhya with us." Sita tried to cajole Rama.

Lakshmana again warned, "This may be a trap. Please don't go."

Sita laughed. "Surely, Rama, you are not afraid, are you? Please, you must get me the golden deer."

"Lakshmana, Sita is keen on having the deer. I shall go and get it. If it is a trap, I shall know how to get out of it. Don't worry. Stay here, though, and don't stir from Sita's side, until I come back."

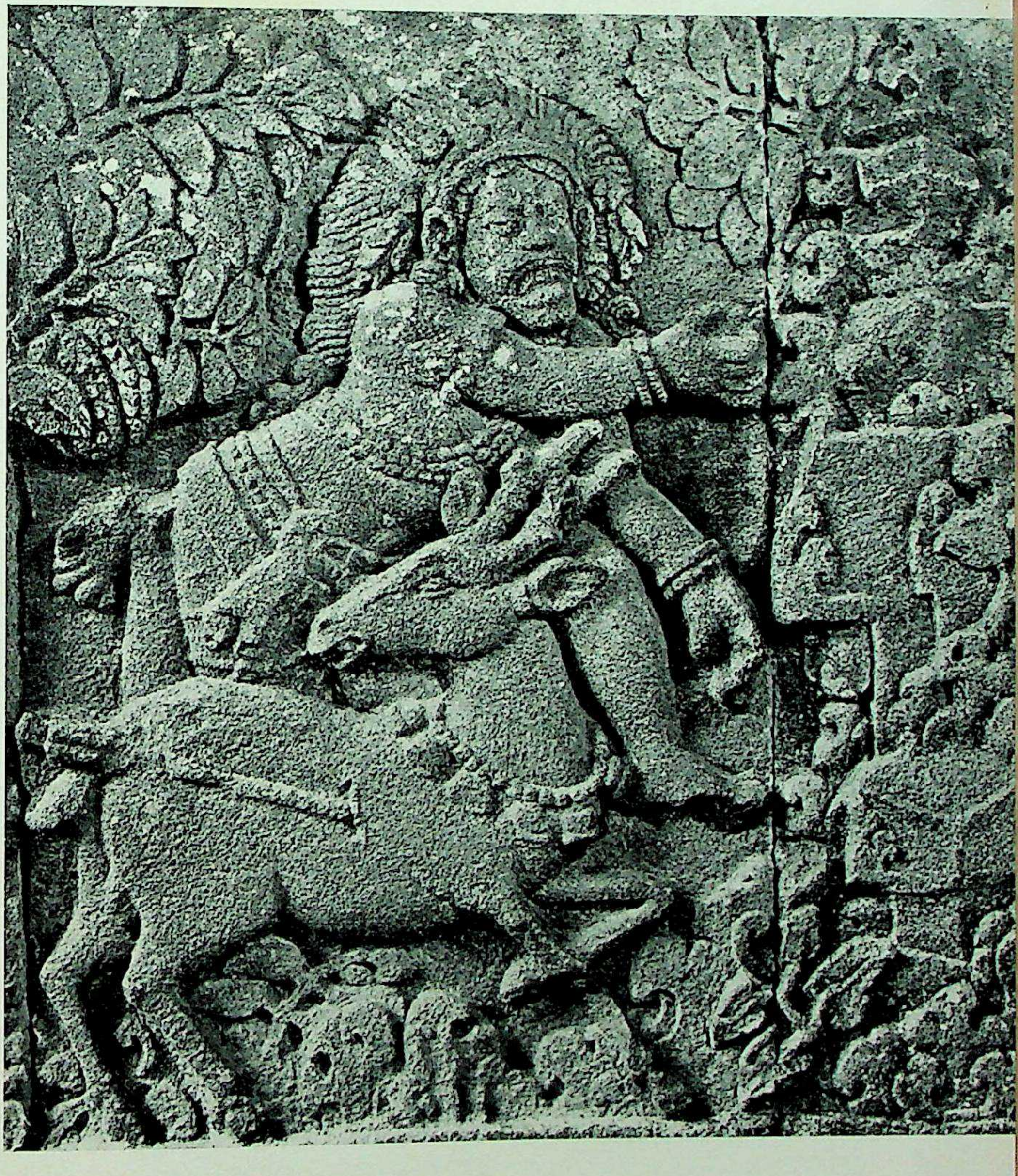
Lakshmana looked on disapprovingly as Rama turned to go with bow in hand. "Remember, Lakshmana, guard Sita with your life." With these parting words, Rama left.

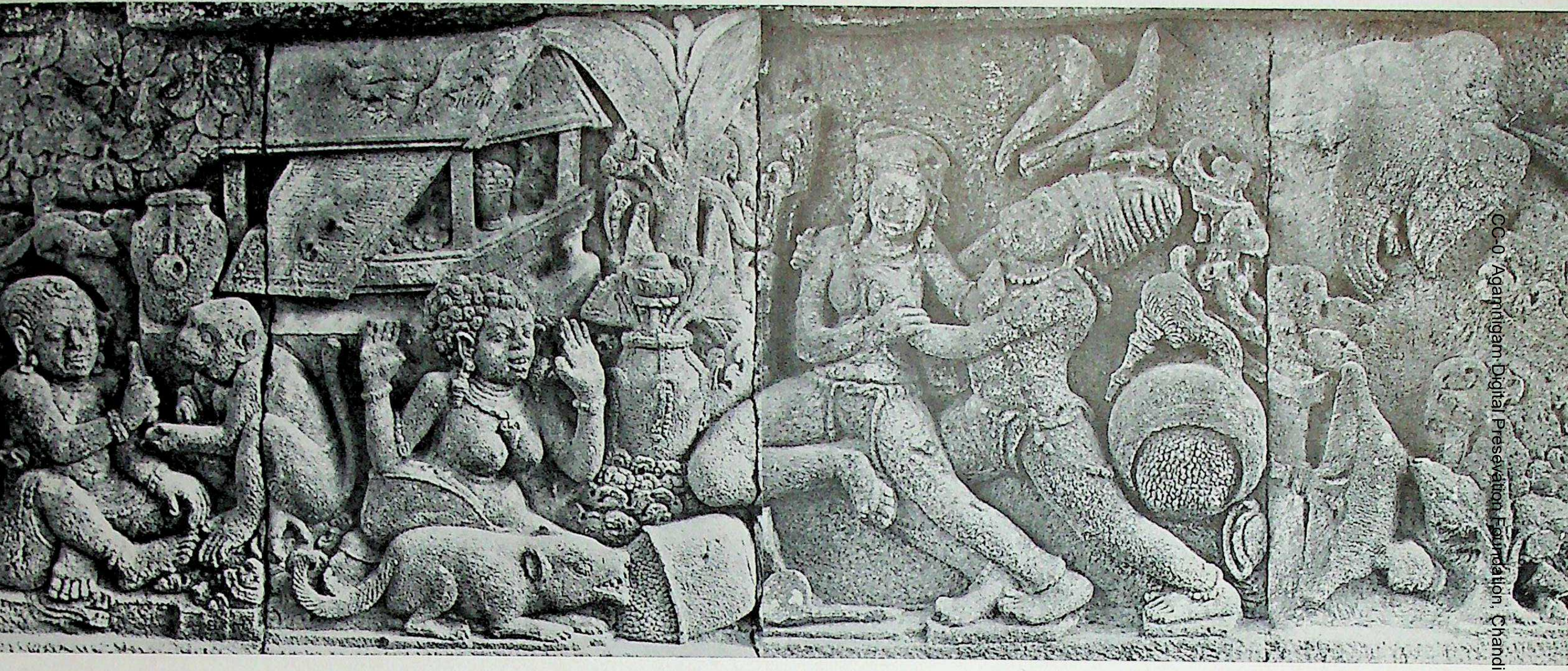
Maricha, the golden deer, ran far into the deep woods and Rama gave him chase. For many a mile ran the deer with Rama in pursuit, until at last Rama got tired of the chase and decided to kill the deer.

As Rama's arrow entered his heart, Maricha knew his end had come. Evil to the last, he cried in a voice that was just like Rama's. . . "Ah Sita . . . Ah Lakshmana . . . Help . . . Help . . ." and then fell back dead.

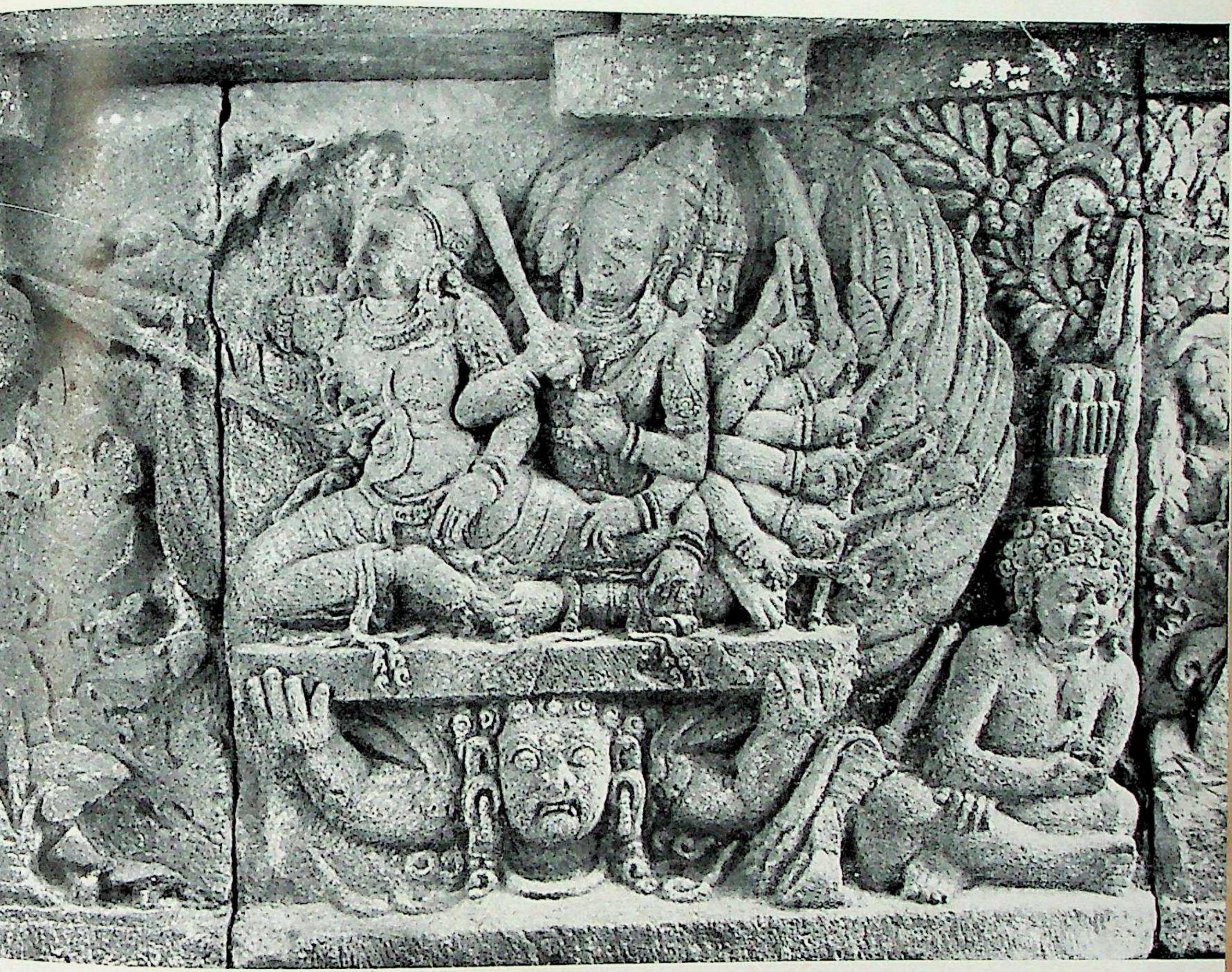
When he died his body once more became that of a rakshasa and Rama realized that Lakshmana was right. He wondered why Maricha

19. "I fear the deer is not real. Have you ever heard of a golden deer?" asked Lakshmana.

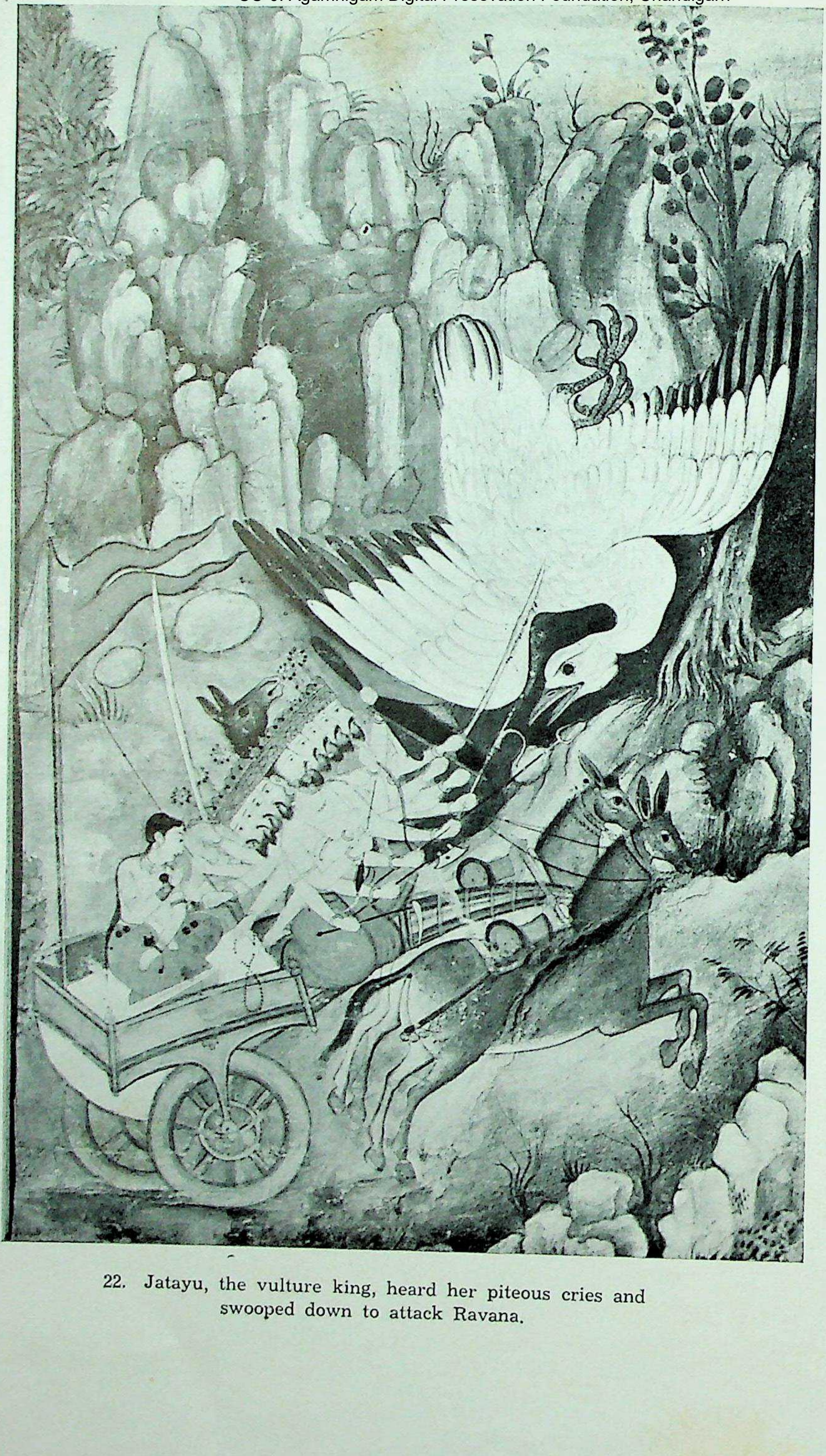




20. Ravana was roused by her scorn. He snatched her up . . . .



21. . . . and throwing her into his chariot, he flew into the clouds.



22. Jatayu, the vulture king, heard her piteous cries and swooped down to attack Ravana.

had cried out for help to Sita and Lakshmana. Was it just to frighten Sita? But then Lakshmana was there to allay her fears. He was sure to steady her.

All the same, the prince hurried back to the cottage. Something seemed to warn him that Sita might be in danger. He hoped and prayed that Sita had not sent Lakshmana after him, worried by the false alarm. He walked faster and faster. . . .

When Sita heard Rama's voice calling for help, she was terrified and begged Lakshmana to run to his aid. Lakshmana tried to calm her. "Can you imagine Rama crying for help . . . he, who destroyed hundreds of demons single-handed in the great battle that you saw? This is surely some rakshasa who is trying to play a trick on us. Do not fear for Rama. He will be by your side in no time."

But Sita would not be comforted. "I fear something terrible has happened to Rama. Go, go quickly!" she urged Lakshmana.

"I think the voice you heard was not that of Rama, but of some wicked rakshasa, perhaps the one who came disguised as a golden deer. Be at ease and do not worry."

Sita did not like Lakshmana's calm reply. She began to think that he did not care what happened to his brother. She imagined herself alone in the forest, unprotected and without Rama. Trembling with fear, she begged Lakshmana again and again to go to the help of his brother. But he refused to stir from his post. At last, Sita lost her patience. Fear changed the gentle princess. She began to accuse Lakshmana of cowardice, of selfishness, and of indifference to his brother. Sita, the sweetest of women, spoke cruel words to Lakshmana.

"So, all the time, Rama and I have been deceived by your show of love. I fear you never really cared for him and now that he is in danger you appear actually happy," she said. This was too much for poor Lakshmana. He could bear Sita's taunts no more. Forgetting Rama's orders and his own feeling that all this was a rakshasa's hoax, Lakshmana left Sita and ran into the forest to look for Rama. So cruelly had he been hurt by her hasty words.

When Lakshmana had gone, Ravana knew that at last his chance had come. Sita was alone. Disguising himself as a poor hermit, he went to the cottage and begged for alms. Sita came out all unsuspecting and, as was the custom among the sages of the forest, bade him welcome. She then laid before him a simple repast of fruits and roots.

When Ravana saw the fair Sita, he realized that she was even more beautiful than he had imagined. "What a dream of a woman! And what would I not give to have her!" he thought to himself. Slowly he drew her into conversation, asking who she was and where she came from, until he thought she no longer feared him. Then he started revealing himself. He told her of his wealth and power, of how he commanded the three worlds and how even the gods were afraid of him.

"Come with me to Lanka and be my consort. You shall enjoy all the riches of the world. What happiness can you have with a mere man, living in the jungles?" he said to her, in a manner that could brook no refusal.

"You may be Ravana, King of Lanka, but to me Rama is everything. I love him and shall be his and only his," replied Sita with a proud toss of her lovely head.

Ravana was roused by her scorn and her beauty. He made up his mind that she must be his. Without further ado, he snatched her up and, throwing her into his chariot, he flew off into the clouds.

"Ah Rama," cried Sita as she was being carried away. "Where are you? Can you not hear my cries? Oh my good Lakshmana, kindest of brothers, how cruelly I drove you away! How I taunted you! And now I am being helplessly taken away. Oh . . . gods, witness my distress!"

Jatayu, the vulture king, heard her piteous cries. He swooped down from the tree top where he was resting.

"How can you help me, poor old bird? At least tell Rama that Ravana of Lanka has taken me away," sobbed Sita.

But Jatayu was brave and undaunted. He loved Rama and was not going to see his wife taken away.

"Ravana, you are a king and a warrior. Face Rama and fight if you must. But don't steal his wife like a coward."

At these words of the bird, Ravana was incensed. He tried to strike the bird with his sword.

"Come, be a warrior and give me proper battle," said Jatayu. Ravana was forced to get off the chariot and fight the bird. There ensued a bloody battle. The old bird fought with rare courage and determination. But, alas, Ravana was too strong for him. He cruelly cut off his wings and wounded him severely. In the end, he struck a mortal blow at the bird's heart. Poor Jatayu fell to the ground.

Sita ran to him. "Dear faithful friend, for my sake you have lost your life. You were a father to us. You were so sweet and so kind . . . dear bird. . ."

But Ravana gave her no time to give relief to the dying bird. Picking her up quickly, he mounted his chariot and rode away into the clouds.

Sita cried out in moving tones, "Ah Rama! Ah Lakshmana! Can't you hear me? The wicked Ravana is carrying me away. Don't you feel my plight, wherever you are? Oh dear trees, sweet flowers, kind birds of the forest, tell my Rama where I have gone and how."

Sita's woeful cries filled the forest. The birds stopped singing and the flowers drooped in sadness. Sita's pet deer shed tears. Even the wild animals slunk away in sorrow. "Sita is being carried away," the very forest seemed to weep.

"You call yourself a warrior, a king . . . you, who crept in like a thief and snatched me away when my Rama was not there!" she said to Ravana in bitter contempt. But Ravana was not moved. The chariot kept cutting through the clouds. Sita was carried fast over rivers and mountains.

Just then, Sita saw below her a few monkeys sitting on a hill top. She took off a few of her jewels and tying them in a bundle, threw them down. At the dropping of a bundle and the sound of a woman's wails, the monkeys looked up in surprise. What was their astonishment when they saw a woman being carried in a chariot!

Ravana crossed the ocean and reached Lanka with Sita. He called some women servants and asked them to look after Sita with great care. "See that she has everything she wants. I wish her to be happy. Do nothing to give her pain," he ordered them. "Show her round my palace . . . let her see my wealth, my army, and the sources of all my power. Tell her all about me. Let her learn what a powerful king Ravana is," he added. Then he sent for some of his best men and instructed them to go to Panchavati and keep an eye on Rama. Ravana knew what a great hero Khara was and Rama had killed him! He felt he must be on guard.

The next day, Ravana came to Sita in high glee. He hoped to win her love with kind words. He also hoped that she had been impressed by the sight of all his power and glory. For she had been shown Ravana's riches, his armoury, his palaces, his fortresses and the rare treasures he had taken from the devas themselves.

"Sita, have you seen all this? Are you satisfied? You know now how powerful I am. See how great is my glory! My riches are heaped like mountains and my arms are so long that I can reach out for more. See what happiness is in store for you! Be my queen and you shall rule the three worlds. Only say that you will be mine." Thus prattled the wicked demon to the fair daughter of Janaka. Sita did not answer him, and thinking he had made a conquest, Ravana continued his boasts. "Rama can never find you; Lanka is far away in the midst of the seas. Give up all ideas of going back to him. I shall make you my chief queen and all that is mine will be yours. Only command me . . . divine . . . lovely . . Sita."

With a great effort, Sita shook off her stupor and her grief. She began to speak with disdainful anger.

"Coward that you are, you forget that you are talking to the wife of the man who slaughtered your demons like flies on the plains of Panchavati. Do you think that hero will fold his arms and keep quiet when he knows you have abducted me? Do you think he is a coward like you to go sneaking home to Ayodhya without killing the man who took his wife? Wait . . . only wait, and you will suffer the same fate as the rest at the hands of my Rama. You dare speak words of love to me! Go away. I detest you."

Sita's words stung Ravana to great anger.

"I see . . . that is your answer, is it? Very well then. Think it over carefully. I shall give you time. If in twelve months you do not change your mind, my cooks shall make me a breakfast dish out of you," he replied threateningly.

Sita hardly heeded him. She believed firmly that Rama would come and rescue her long before that time. Gentle and tender though she was, she showed she was the daughter of a king. Courageous and full of hope, she withstood Ravana's threats. She waited patiently for the happy day when she would again be with the prince of Ayodhya.

The rakshasis, her gaolers, took her into the wonderful garden of Asoka. There, Sita spent many unhappy months in tears, pining away and recalling her days at Panchavati. Alas! poor Sita. She did not know that Lanka was so far away, or how difficult it would be for Rama to get there. He might not get news of her and might not be able to find out where she was. Sita was quite unaware of all the troubles that lay in Rama's path, says the poet Valmiki.

# Chapter Ten

Rama walked fast, full of anxious thoughts. Just then Lakshmana appeared round the bend. At the sight of his brother, Rama knew for certain that very grave danger was in store for Sita. His heart beat with fear for her. "Why are you here? Why have you left Sita?" he asked his brother curtly.

Lakshmana looked abashed. Already he was beginning to feel he should not have left Sita.

"We heard cries for help. It seemed to be your voice. She insisted that I should go at once to help you," he replied.

"You should have been firm and not left her. As you suspected, that deer turned out to be a rakshasa. In fact, it was Maricha. I do not know what deep plans the rakshasas have made against us. Lakshmana, I fear the worst for Sita. Oh, why did you leave her?"

Lakshmana was blinded by his own unhappiness. "Sita spoke cruel words to me. She said things which hurt my soul. I could not bear her accusations, so I came away."

"Surely you knew better than to heed her words. Poor thing, naturally she was frightened and must have tried to send you to me by some means or the other. But you know how mad the rakshasas are at our victory in Panchavati. They are only waiting for revenge. I am sure they mean to take it out of Sita. Oh! Lakshmana what a foolish thing you did when you left the cottage." So saying, he hurried back to the hut.

As Rama had feared, Sita was nowhere to be seen. He found the remains of Ravana's meal and Sita's little things lying strewn about the cottage. The brothers looked everywhere. Sita was not to be found. Rama's grief knew no bounds. He wept and cried like a child, calling out to his friends of the forest to tell him where Sita was.

"Tell me, dear tree, where is Sita? Oh river Godavari, did you see her go by?" And so Rama went on, pitifully asking the forest for news of Sita. The trees hung their heads in sorrow and the deer shed tears. Yet none could tell them where Sita went.

"Perhaps the demons have eaten her up. I know they love human flesh. They must have torn her to pieces. Lakshmana, I cannot bear the thought." Rama wept bitterly.

Lakshmana tried to console him. "Do not give in so quickly. I am sure Sita is alive. Let us search the forest well," he said.

Suddenly Rama had an idea. Perhaps it was all a joke. Sita loved to play pranks on them. Even now she might be hiding in a cave or bathing in the river. "Let us search," he exclaimed hurriedly. Again they began their search; they searched high and low.

"Come out of your place, dear heart. I cannot bear to be separated from you any more," cried Rama into the hollows of trees and under bushes. But Sita was not to be seen. No delightful laugh greeted them from inside the caves.

Rama began to lose heart. He asked all the animals again and again whether they knew what had happened to Sita. One flock of deer made a sign as if to say, "Go south." Rama and Lakshmana took the cue and walked southwards, calling out aloud to Sita as they went.

"How can I go back to Ayodhya? How can I face my mother without Sita? And what consolation can I offer to Janaka? What will I say to the people of Ayodhya, who will want to know why I was so foolish as to lose Sita?" Rama raved on. He looked as if he was out of his senses.

Lakshmana knew that Sita's loss had been too much for him. He tried his best to soothe Rama. "Do not lose hope, dear brother. You are a prince and a hero. You should not give in to weakness. Let us find our enemy and kill him," he said.

Suddenly as they were walking, they found flowers scattered on the ground. "These are from Sita's hair; I gave them to her this morning," said Rama with alarm.

They walked on, keenly looking for more signs. Then they came upon the scene of battle between Jatayu and Ravana. Blunt arrows, broken bits of sword and pieces of the chariot littered the ground. A bit farther away, they found Jatayu on the point of death. Rama ran to gather the bird in his arms. "Rama," whispered the dying bird, "Ravana, King of Lanka, is carrying off Sita. I tried to stop him and fight him but he has finished me."

"Oh, what a brave bird! What a protector! How great is your glory," murmured Rama, his throat choking with sobs.

"Do not fear. You will find Sita and all will be well." With these words the old bird breathed its last.

Rama wept over this fresh loss. "Alas! misfortunes overtake us one after another. Our dear Jatayu is dead, and Sita is far away, we know not where, in the clutches of the wicked Ravana," lamented Rama.

Lakshmana was undaunted. "Brother, let us be up and doing. We shall find Ravana's lair, kill him and rescue Sita. Come, let us go."

Rama and Lakshmana wandered about the forest searching endlessly for Sita. The mountains and forests echoed with their cries as they raised their voices to call for her. They did not know where to look, for the vulture king had been too near death to tell them how Ravana had carried Sita away.

Some days later Rama came to the banks of the river Pampa. Nearby was the hill of Rishyamukha. It was spring. The forest was in bloom and the river flowed by tinkling and murmuring. Rama thought of Sita and how she would have loved the place. "Lakshmana, I cannot bear this spring air. It reminds me of Sita," he said in sad tones.

Lakshmana replied, "Do not despair. We are now in Rishyamukha where our friends, the rishis, asked us to look for Sugriva, the monkey king. I am sure this monkey will be able to help us find Sita's whereabouts. I feel we are nearing the end of our search."

Now Sugriva was hiding from his brother at Rishyamukha hill. He did not like the way these two tall, handsome-looking warriors wandered about the hilly forests, with bows in hand. He feared they might be men sent by his brother to capture him. So he hid among the peaks and sent down his minister, the monkey Hanuman, to find out what they were up to.

Hanuman approached Rama and Lakshmana in disguise. But soon he gave up all pretence of hiding the truth from them, for he was struck by their beauty, their strength and their conversation. When he learnt who they were, he was convinced that these superb princes would help Sugriva to regain his kingdom. Hanuman knew nothing of Rama's exploits. He judged him merely by his general demeanour. Yet such was the brilliance of Rama's face, his dazzling eyes and the shape of his powerful arms, that Hanuman knew he was looking at a great warrior. He went back to his king and reported what he saw and what he thought. Soon a meeting was arranged between Sugriva and Rama. It was curious, but Rama made friends at once with the monkeys. It was as if old friends had met, and not as though they were meeting for the first time.

When that divine creature had appeared long ago in Dasaratha's sacrificial fire, bringing in his bowl the spirit of Vishnu, the devas decided that they too must send down their powers to help. So strong monkeys with superhuman skill and ability were born in Kishkinda, the kingdom of the monkeys. Some were fast like the wind-god, others strong like the sun-god. Some could fight like Indra, and some could cross oceans with the power of the sea-god. But all could talk and act like men, though they were monkeys. The divine strength, however, lay hidden. Having sent their sons down to earth as monkeys, the devas waited patiently for the day when the monkeys could help Rama to destroy the demon.

Sugriva, Hanuman, Rama and Lakshmana had long intimate talks in the caves of Rishyamukha. They told each other their sorrows.

When Sugriva heard of how Ravana had carried away Sita, he suddenly remembered the bundle dropped by the woman in the flying chariot.

"One day, my friends and I saw somebody carrying a woman in a flying chariot. She was crying, 'Rama . . . Lakshmana . . .' and she dropped a bundle here amidst us. Perhaps it was your Sita," remarked Sugriva.

"Go, get the bundle here at once," said Rama in eager tones, not able to wait to see the treasures.

The monkeys ran in to get the bundle. Rama could not open it with his trembling fingers. Lakshmana undid the knot. Inside they found Sita's ornaments. "Look, Lakshmana, can you recognize these?" asked Rama in a grief-stricken tone.

"No, I do not know all of them, but I recall the anklet which I used to see daily when I bowed at her feet." Lakshmana's eyes filled with tears. Rama was lost in unhappy thoughts.

Meanwhile Sugriva was wondering how to get Rama to kill his brother, Vali. Rama, it was clear, was a supreme warrior, but he was now in sorrow. Would he consider killing the monkey's brother more important than going in search of Sita? Besides, if he heard Sugriva's story he might not agree with him that Vali had been unfair to his brother. He might even think that Sugriva had tried to usurp the throne just as Vali himself had thought.

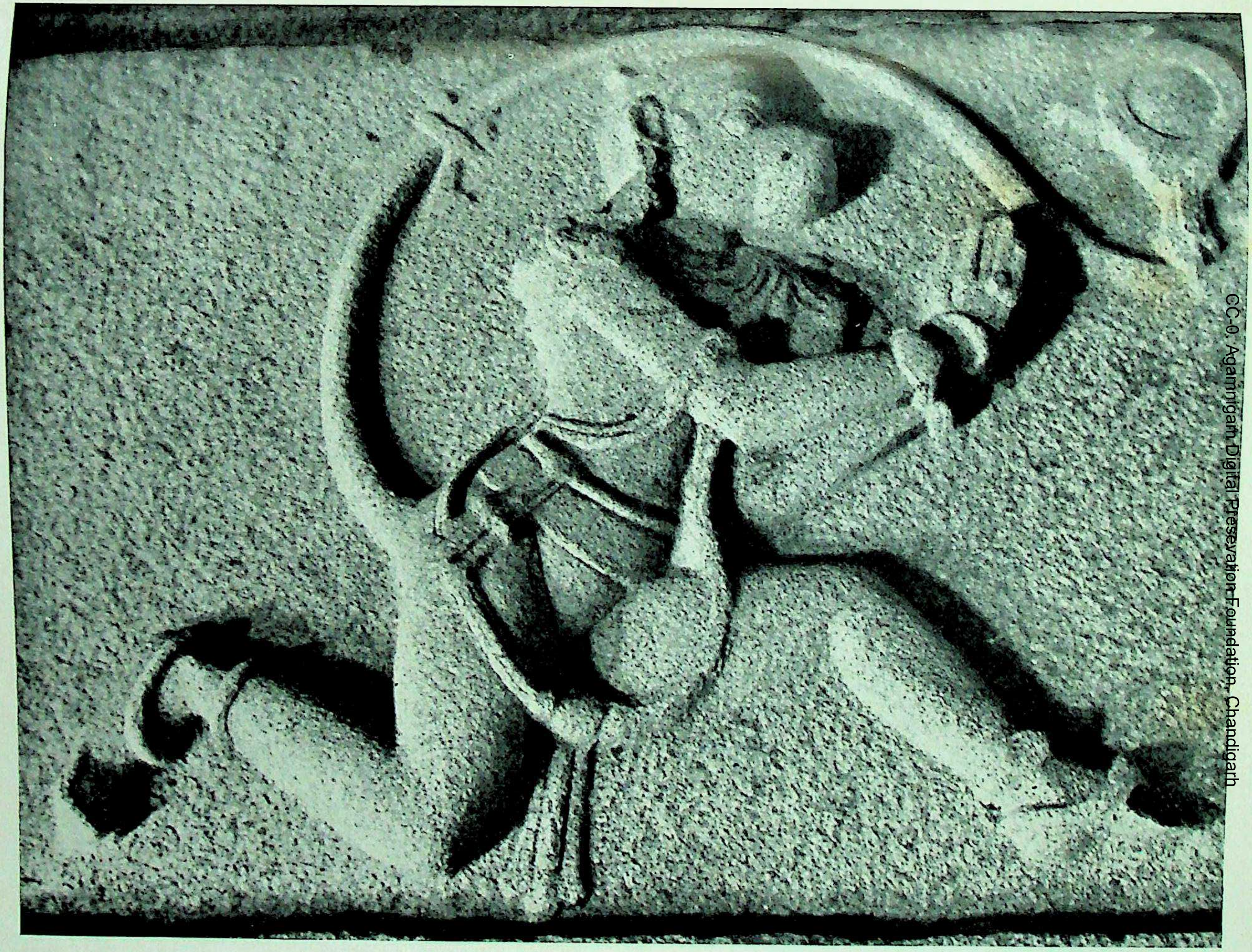
Sugriva was in doubt. He did not know how to ask his new friend for help.

At last he said hesitatingly, "Rama, I know Ravana's power. Even so, I can help you to defeat him. But, we must find out first where he has hidden Sita. I cannot do that now as I live in fear of Vali. It is because of him I am in hiding here. He has sworn to destroy me."

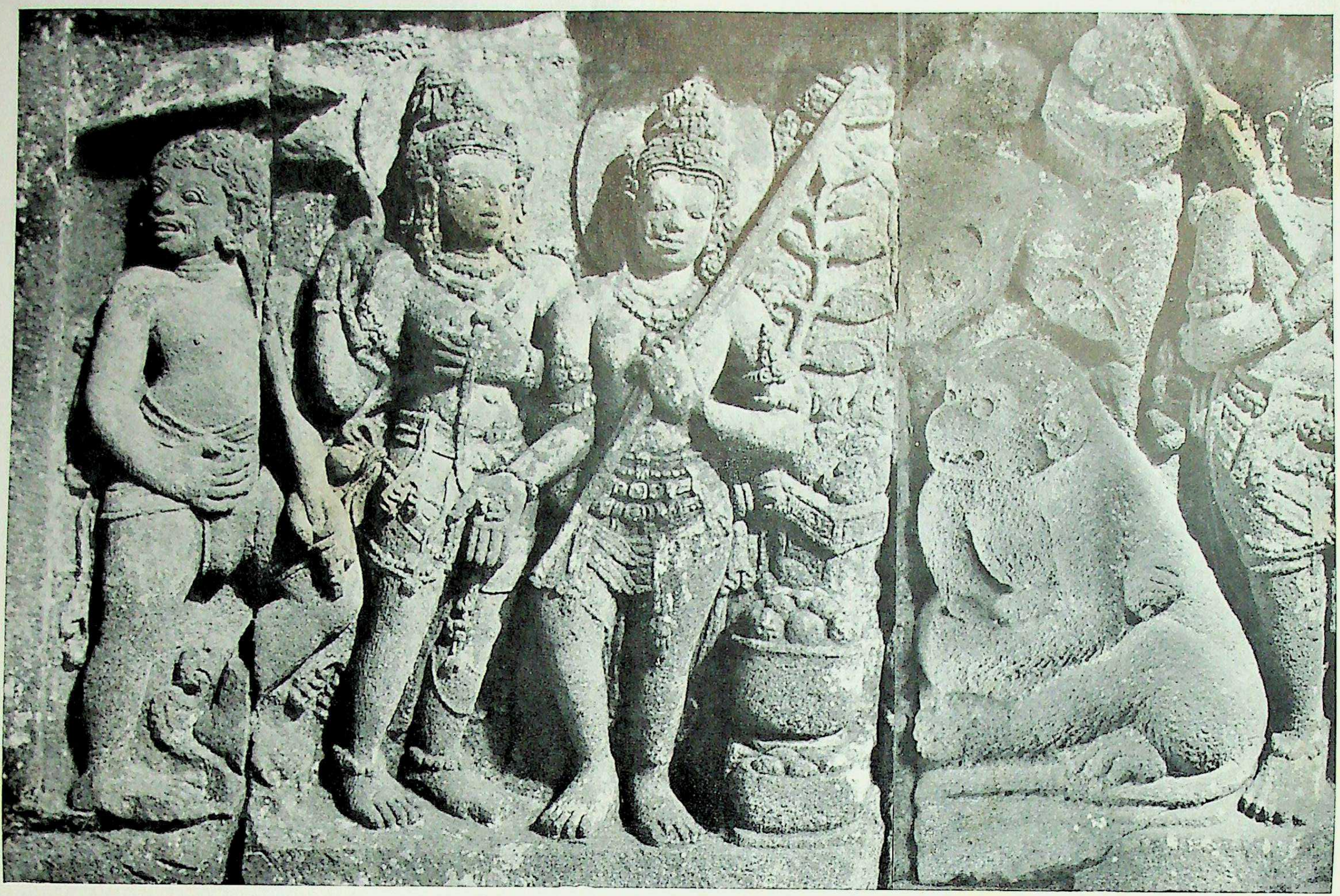
Rama understood what was wanted of him. He asked, "Tell me, how it came about that you and your brother have become such bitter enemies?"

Sugriva then related his tale.

Once Vali and Sugriva had lived together in happiness at Kishkinda, the capital of the monkey kingdom. Vali was the eldest, and he ruled



23. Hanuman was fast like the wind-god.



24. Rama and Lakshmana make a friend of Sugriva, the monkey king.

as king while Sugriva served him with deep love and reverence. Vali was strong and powerful and he loved the gentle Sugriva in his own way. But he was given to fits of anger, when he lost all powers of reasoning. It was on one such occasion that he exiled Sugriva from the kingdom.

It happened thus.

Vali was challenged to battle by a demon called Mayavi. The brothers went together to fight him. Mayavi entered a cave and Vali followed him. Sugriva wanted to go too but his brother stopped him. "Stay behind near the entrance. I shall make quick work of this demon and return in no time," he said to his brother as he went in.

Sugriva waited patiently. Days went by; weeks went by; months rolled on . . . and yet there was no sign of Vali. At last, Sugriva heard the demon roaring inside the cave. Then, to his horror, he saw a stream of blood flowing out. Struck with terror, he concluded that Vali had been killed by Mayavi and his demon friends. He covered the entrance to the cave with a huge rock and ran home to save himself.

Thereafter Sugriva went about sadly, trying to do his duty in Vali's absence. The monkeys (or vanaras) of the kingdom felt the dire need of a king. They had always liked Sugriva better. Why not have him as king now that Vali was no more? They begged Sugriva to be crowned. Unfortunately, Sugriva was weak; also he was fond of power and not averse to being a king. He yielded to the entreaties of the vanaras and was crowned.

All would have been well had not Vali come back. Having killed the demon Mayavi, Vali returned only to find his brother on the throne. He was furious. His temper rose like a storm and burst over his brother. He could not bear the thought that Sugriva had robbed him of his crown. He refused to listen to his brother's gentle explanations.

"Brother, I truly believed you dead, and took the crown only because the vanaras pressed me so. I am ready to give it back to you and shall serve you as faithfully as before," he said. But Vali would have none of him. He drove him away from Kishkinda and swore to kill him if ever he set eyes on him again.

"Can you wonder, Rama, that I tremble to meet my valiant brother? Hence I spend my time wandering the hills and dales like a poor hermit with only these four faithful vanaras," said Sugriva sadly.

Rama felt sorry for Sugriva and would have gladly helped him, but he hesitated a little. After all, Vali was the rightful king of Kishkinda. Was it therefore just to kill him and offer the crown to Sugriva? At the same time Rama realized that he could not be sure of Vali if he appealed to him for help against Ravana. It was true that once

Vali had defeated Ravana in battle, but now they were friends. How could Rama depend on Vali even if he promised to help? He might change his mind. For it was clear from what Sugriva had said that Vali was headstrong, proud and arrogant. He might not relish the idea of leading an army to Lanka under Rama's orders.

On the other hand Sugriva looked a staunch friend and if he helped him he would be in honour bound to aid him in his quest for Sita. After long thought Rama decided to help Sugriva against his brother.

Lakshmana looked a bit worried. "Are you sure, Rama, that you have thought over it carefully?" he asked.

Rama nodded. "Yes, I feel certain Sugriva will turn out to be a true friend while I am not so sure of Vali from what I hear of his deeds," replied Rama in firm tones.

# Chapter Eleven

The next day Rama and Sugriva took solemn oaths promising to stand by each other and help one another. Having made his promise, Rama decided to act at once. He therefore advised Sugriva to attack Kishkinda with whatever force he had. At this Sugriva looked aghast. What! Attack the great Vali with just the four followers he had! Surely Rama knew Vali's strength!

Rama smiled.

"My brother has killed many rakshasas and defeated Ravana himself in battle. He has won far-flung fame as a great warrior," explained Sugriva.

Rama merely nodded his head.

"Do you know Vali's strength? When he wants to fight, he just pulls out a huge tree by its roots and marches into battle."

At this Rama merely took out his bow and, stringing an arrow, sent it towards a tree. The arrow pierced the tree and then darted through six other trees standing in a row behind it.

Sugriva was completely thunderstruck at this proof of Rama's skill.

He said humbly, "Tell me what I should do. Do you really think I should advance on him with my four men?"

"Yes," replied Rama, "However, do not be alarmed. I shall remain close behind, but in hiding. The moment there is any danger, I shall act."

Sugriva took courage and marched ahead to Kishkinda.

Vali saw his brother approaching the walls of Kishkinda from his palace window. He was surprised, for he had left his brother in no doubt as to what would happen if he tried to enter the city. What surprised him even more was the attitude of the exiled monkeys. They seemed to be marching in fighting order. What could be the reason? Vali was puzzled. Then suddenly his anger rose. "What means this? Does Sugriva wish to die?" he asked in a loud voice, preparing to attack him.

Vali's wife, Tara, tried to stop him. "Sugriva has come again after being beaten by you several times. He looks bold. This means he has some powerful friends. Do not attack him. Let us see what he does. Surely he cannot hope to take Kishkinda with four vanara warriors!" she pleaded.

But Vali was loth to appear a coward. His vain and arrogant nature could not bear the thought that there were others more powerful than him. He made up his mind to attack and came roaring out of the gates of Kishkinda. This was too much for Sugriva. He sprang to counter-attack his brother. What a magnificent pair they were, these two golden monkeys that looked like mountains shining in the sun!

The duel between the brothers became quite bloody. Sugriva was badly hit and Vali's battle cries often became cries of pain. Yet they went on and Rama watched them from his hiding place. Soon he realized Sugriva was weakening and that if he let the fight go on, his friend might be killed. He watched anxiously as the two monkeys continued the tussle. In the heat of the fight, they were locked together and rolled on the ground with ferocious grunts. Rama now really feared for Sugriva. Therefore, promptly taking out an arrow he aimed it skilfully at the breast of the older monkey. Vali, the huge vanara king, fell down with a roar. He was mortally wounded and gasped for breath as he lay in a pool of blood.

Now Vali might have treated his brother badly, but he was truly brave and also a wonderful soldier. He was massive and full of superhuman strength. Who was the man who downed him? Wounded as he was, he cast his eyes about him seeking his invisible foe. "Come out, whoever it was who sent this arrow," he cried in a clear voice in spite of his mortal agony. Then there appeared before him a lustrous form, so beautiful and so divine that Vali wondered whether he was already in heaven.

"Who are you? Why did you interfere in our quarrel?" Vali asked Rama.

Rama told him his tale.

"Alas! How misguided we have all been! I behaved badly to Sugriva and you have punished me thus. Why did you not ask for my help? I would have crushed Ravana for you in no time."

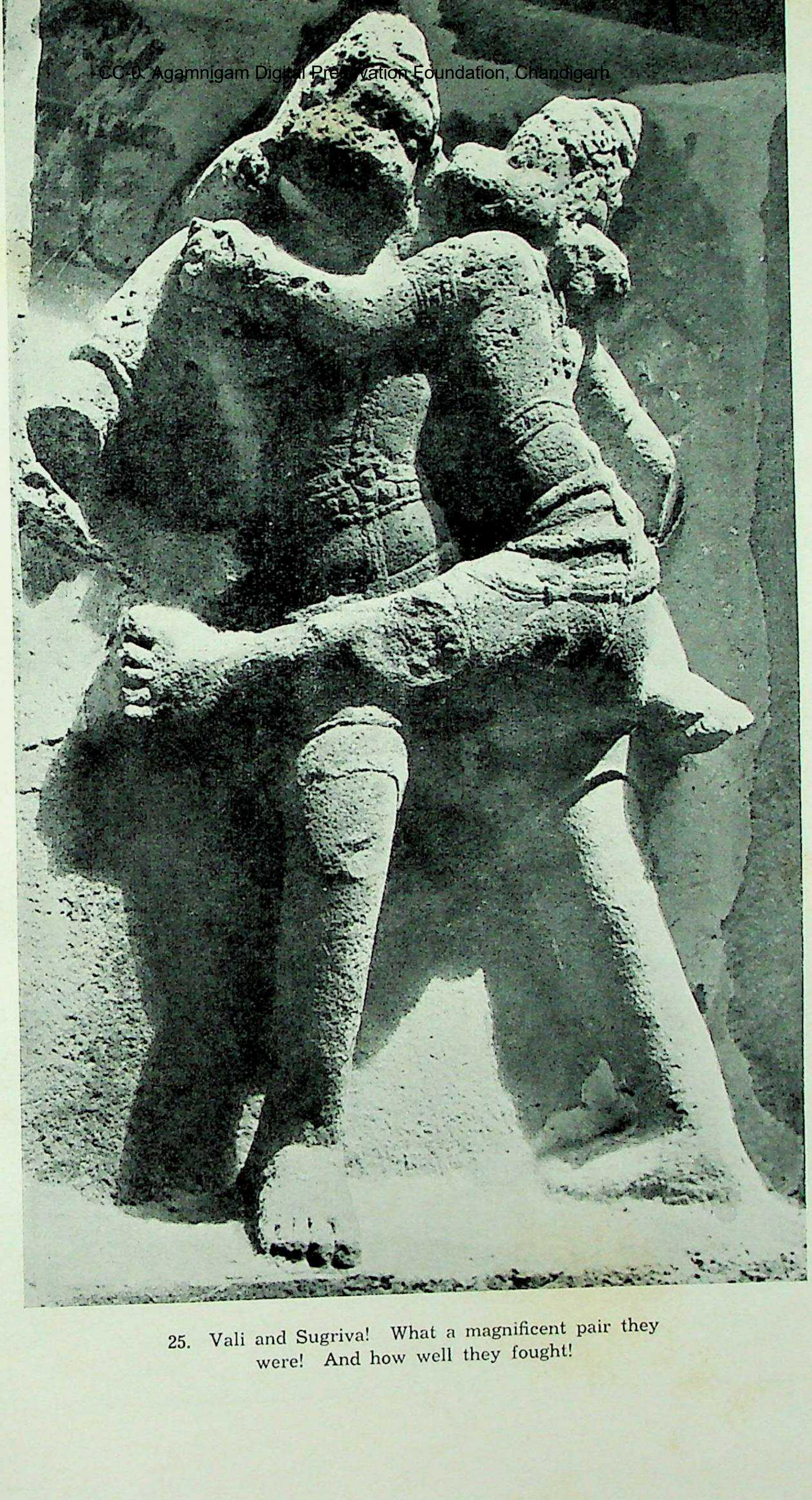
"But you are Ravana's friend," said Rama.

"True, yet I would not have supported him in this wicked deed of his."

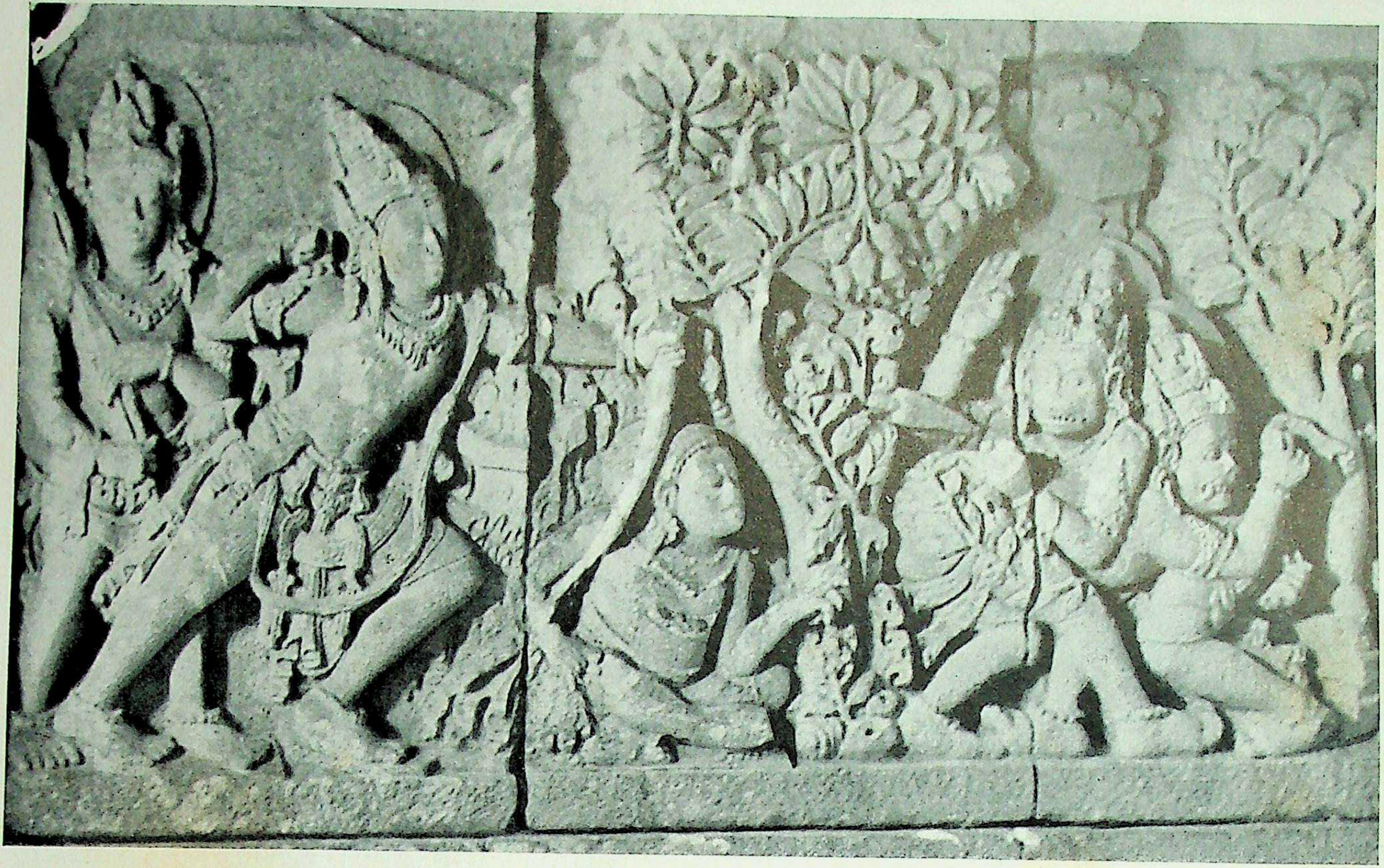
Vali's words were full of fire. Even while dying, heroism shone out of his golden eyes.

Sugriva's huge breast shook with sobs.

"Alas! What a fool I have been! I have killed my brother who was



25. Vali and Sugriva! What a magnificent pair they were! And how well they fought!



26. Promptly taking out an arrow, Rama aimed it skilfully at the breast of the older monkey.

a true hero! Look at him lying there in this state—his body full of wounds—and yet he talks as he does!"

"Sugriva," Vali beckoned to his brother. "Do not weep. It is as much my fault as yours. I treated you badly. I need not have shown such anger, such contempt and such pride. I have paid dearly for my folly. Rule Kishkinda well and let my son Angada be king after you," he said.

Vali's strength was now drained out and he could only whisper when Tara reached the spot. His eyes closed and soon the great monkey king breathed his last.

Sugriva was crowned King of Kishkinda. That huge vanara looked glorious in his crown. His golden body was adorned with the garland of pearls that had once been Vali's. By his side stood Angada, whose strength was second only to Vali's. There were other vanaras, strong, brave and full of spirit, in Sugriva's court. Rama looked on them with satisfaction. Surely these brave monkeys would now help him.

But Sugriva was after all only a monkey, it seemed. For he let the days pass by without doing anything. He found an excuse: it was raining and in the rainy season, he said, the mountains and hills were impassable. Meanwhile, the monkey king fell to enjoying himself. He plunged into a life of gaiety, giving himself to wine and song.

And Rama pined away in a cave nearby. He grew thin, eating nothing and constantly dreaming of Sita. Lakshmana could not bear to see him thus. They waited in vain to see Sugriva in action. At last Lakshmana's patience gave away. His anger mounted to his head. Bow in hand, he strode into Sugriva's palace, full of determination to kill him. "Of what use is a friend who has broken his promise? Come out you coward, and let me get my hands on you," he shouted. Sugriva came out in great trepidation. "Forgive me, I am sorry. I should have set about this matter earlier. But do not think I had completely forgotten. I have given orders to collect my vanara hordes. They will be here any day now," he said to Lakshmana. At the mention of the vanara army and the preparations to begin the search, Lakshmana forgot his anger. He fell on Sugriva's neck and hugged him tightly.

"You are a good and true friend. I am sorry I suspected you," he said in relief.

Sugriva's hordes collected at Kishkinda. All these vanaras were brave, strong and also very cunning and swift in their movements. There was one, however, who was braver, stronger and cleverer than the rest. He could uproot trees, lift huge rocks and cross from hill to hill in one jump. He was Hanuman. Looking at him, and other strong vanaras like him, Rama felt encouraged. Surely these monkeys possessed superhuman strength and were just the right foes for the rakshasas! Besides it was well known that they were favoured by the gods. Some of them like Hanuman were supposed to be born of the gods themselves. Their manner, valour and exhibition of strength seemed to justify this belief. Indeed they might have been born for the destruction of the rakshasas, thought Rama to himself, such enthusiasm did the vanaras display on learning that they were to go to rakshasa land in search of the princess.

Sugriva divided his forces into four divisions and, instructing them very carefully how to look for Sita, he sent them north, south, east and west. Angada, Hanuman and the rest of one division went south.

Now Rama knew that Lanka was in the south and he felt that Hanuman was most likely to find her; so he called him to his side. "I know you are going southward. You might meet Sita. If you do, give her this ring and news of us. Also promise her that I shall come quickly to kill the fiend Ravana," said Rama. As he thought of the tender princess in the hands of the rakshasas, his eyes grew dim.

"Have no doubt, Rama. We shall find Sita," said Hanuman taking the ring in his hands with reverence.

The vanaras who went south wandered for many days. They met with many dangers and had to cross great rivers and mountains. Yet they searched diligently everywhere they went. There was no sign of either Ravana or Sita. At last, tired and sad, they reached the southern shores.

At this cape point they sat, looking at each other and not knowing what to do. They dared not go back, for Sugriva had said sternly, "Do not come back without news of Sita. Those who do will have nothing but death waiting for them."

They dared not go forward, for the immense southern ocean was before them. For many a day they talked over what had happened and what they should do. "It looks as if we have all to perish here. It is clear we cannot go back," they said to one another.

Now it happened that Sampati, Jatayu's brother, lived among the rocks near the sea. He heard the vanaras talking of Rama, and, hearing his brother's name, listened with keen interest. "What is this, these monkeys are saying . . . that my brother is dead. . . . Could it be true? I must find out," he said to himself and came out of his dwelling.

Soon he found out all that had happened. He grieved deeply for Jatayu but consoled himself that he had died in a good cause. "My brother died in Rama's service. What more could he wish? He is lucky to have served the son of the great Ikshvaku," he said.

"I know where Lanka is," Sampati told the monkeys. At this, the vanaras crowded around him in great glee. "Tell us," they cried, their faces wreathed in smiles. "Tell us," they shouted in happy voices.

"I can help you. I have long-distance vision and can see far into the land and sea. I see Lanka from here. It is several miles out. I can see Ravana in his palace and Sita too, sitting, weeping. If one of you is strong enough to jump off from yonder rock and cross the sea, you can go to Lanka and see for yourself," he said.

At once, the monkeys stopped their chatter. They looked at the huge expanse of water before them in despair. Who can cross the seas and without a boat or a guide? They sat down again in hopeless sorrow. "There is no hope for us or for Sita. Let us die here rather than face our king's anger," they all cried.

Then Hanuman rose slowly to his feet; and as he drew himself up to his full height, he grew bigger and bigger in size. Throwing out his chest, he closed his fist and twisted his tail about. His eyes blazed. His huge mountainous body filled the sky. He seemed to threaten the demons even from this shore. "I shall go" he thundered. "I shall jump across and come back with news of Sita." The vanaras looked with wonder at this brave monkey, his face luminous with the courage that shone from within.

Hanuman strode off to the top of a hill near the beach. All the vanaras followed him, dancing with happiness and shouting their blessing. "We are saved. Hanuman will save us," they all sang. Then Hanuman prayed to his godfather, Vayu, the wind-god, who always helped him. He shook his fists and bent his knees. He tried a few jumps and stood on his toes. Then with a roar the huge vanara took off from the hill-side like an aeroplane in full speed. The eager faces of the vanara army watched him until he disappeared behind a cloud.

Now it is no easy matter to cross the seas with a huge body like that, but the wind-god guided Hanuman and gave him strength. He came to Hanuman's aid without his knowing it, whenever Hanuman met with danger. And he did encounter many troubles. There was a wild, fish-like demon, who rose from the sea and who wanted to eat him. Hanuman killed him easily. Then a mountain rose from the sea, obstructing his path. There was a sea-demon who tried to fly with him, pretending friendship. All this and many other dangers Hanuman overcame with the strength of his hard fist and powerful tail.

At last, he sighted the island of Lanka. He wanted to land very quietly, for he wished to look for the princess without being disturbed by the demons. "Time enough to worry them afterwards. First look for Sita," he said softly to himself as he entered Lanka.

# Chapter Twelve

At the sight of the wonderful city of Lanka, Hanuman was struck with amazement. He had not expected to see such beauty. Ravana must surely have modelled the city after Indra's Amaravati!

It was quite dark when he landed. Night had fallen on the city. Hanuman reduced his size. If he went about looking like an ordinary monkey, nobody would suspect him. He could then quickly search all over the place. He must move silently, for it would never do to ruin his chances of finding Sita by falling into the hands of the rakshasas. Besides, it was senseless to invite trouble. The rakshasas appeared to be well armed. Hanuman moved with cat-like softness, into the smallest corners of Lanka, looking for the beloved of Rama.

At the same time, he did not fail to observe and wonder at the power and strength of the enemy.

What he saw was a very rich and prosperous city. Certainly the citizens of Lanka seemed to lack nothing. Everywhere he went, Hanuman saw signs of wealth and glory. There were palaces, gardens and theatres all over the city. The people were richly clad and moved about the streets in happy groups. He saw men and women enjoying themselves in gay abandon.

The city appeared well fortified, with moats on all sides. Warriors and soldiers in resplendent uniforms moved about the town, their armours making loud clanking noises on the pavements. The rakshasas seemed to have stone-throwing-machine factories and armouries in great numbers. Army horses and elephants filled the stables. There were chariots of every description. Hanuman saw so many signs of rakshasa skill and knowledge that he began to marvel at the greatness of the demons in both war and peace. For, not only did armed soldiers walk the streets, but sounds of singing and music came from within the houses. They appeared brave, pious, learned and cultured. Hanuman heard sacred mantras being recited. He also saw that religious rites and sacrifices were being performed with great fervour. The slender gopurams of the temples gave an air of enchantment to the city. He heard the melodious clang of temple bells.

The demons, themselves, were of all shapes, sizes and colours. Some were ugly, others very good-looking. Some were tall and dark, while others appeared fair and short. Some rakshasa women looked really beautiful. Many such lovely women adorned the terraces and windows of the palaces where the monkey searched for Sita. Hanuman however knew none of them could be the wife of Rama. Where was she? He peeped into the houses, opened doors and unfastened windows. There was no sign of Sita.

He became dejected. He had crossed the ocean with great hopes. He had searched with eager, anxious eyes. But all that seemed to be in vain. Sita was nowhere to be seen. How could he face his king if he went back now? Sugriva would be sure to order his execution. As for Rama, he would take his life when he learned that Sita was not to be found. Hanuman was in despair.

The sight of Lanka and its fortifications also filled him with anxiety. He doubted whether the monkey army would be a match for the rakshasas. He made up his mind to give Sugriva all the details of this strong, impregnable city. He must warn him of the rakshasas' strength.

Finally, he thought he would try just once more to find Sita. She must be somewhere about the palace. Just then, he saw a beautiful palace before him. It had lovely turrets and domes of gold.

"This must be Ravana's palace; perhaps Sita is in there," said the monkey to himself, as he hurried in.

The vanara's eyes were dazzled by the splendour of the palace. The great arches of the roof were supported by golden columns and the walls were covered with silver carvings. The roofs were painted in sapphire and the floor was a mosaic of precious stones of every hue and colour. Huge chandeliers hung like gems from the ceiling and the lights glimmered like jewels. Ravana's maidens were lovely. Dressed in exquisite robes, they were reclining on silken couches. Some were laughing, some talking and others playing the vina. Hanuman observed them all keenly. Surely none of them could be Sita! Would Sita be happy thus, far away from her Rama? Would Sita laugh and play when she was not with Rama? No. These must be Ravana's wives. Where then was Sita? Hanuman continued his search.

Then in a huge four-postered bed, he came upon the ten-headed king of Lanka. Hanuman was amazed to see the strength of the sleeping demon. What a chest! What enormous arms! How he must have fought his battles—for the monkey could see the marks of former wounds on his face and chest. Ravana, thought Hanuman, looked a great warrior and a worthy foe. He looked wonderingly at the demon, famous in the three worlds and the terror of the gods. Ravana compelled his admiration, in spite of himself.

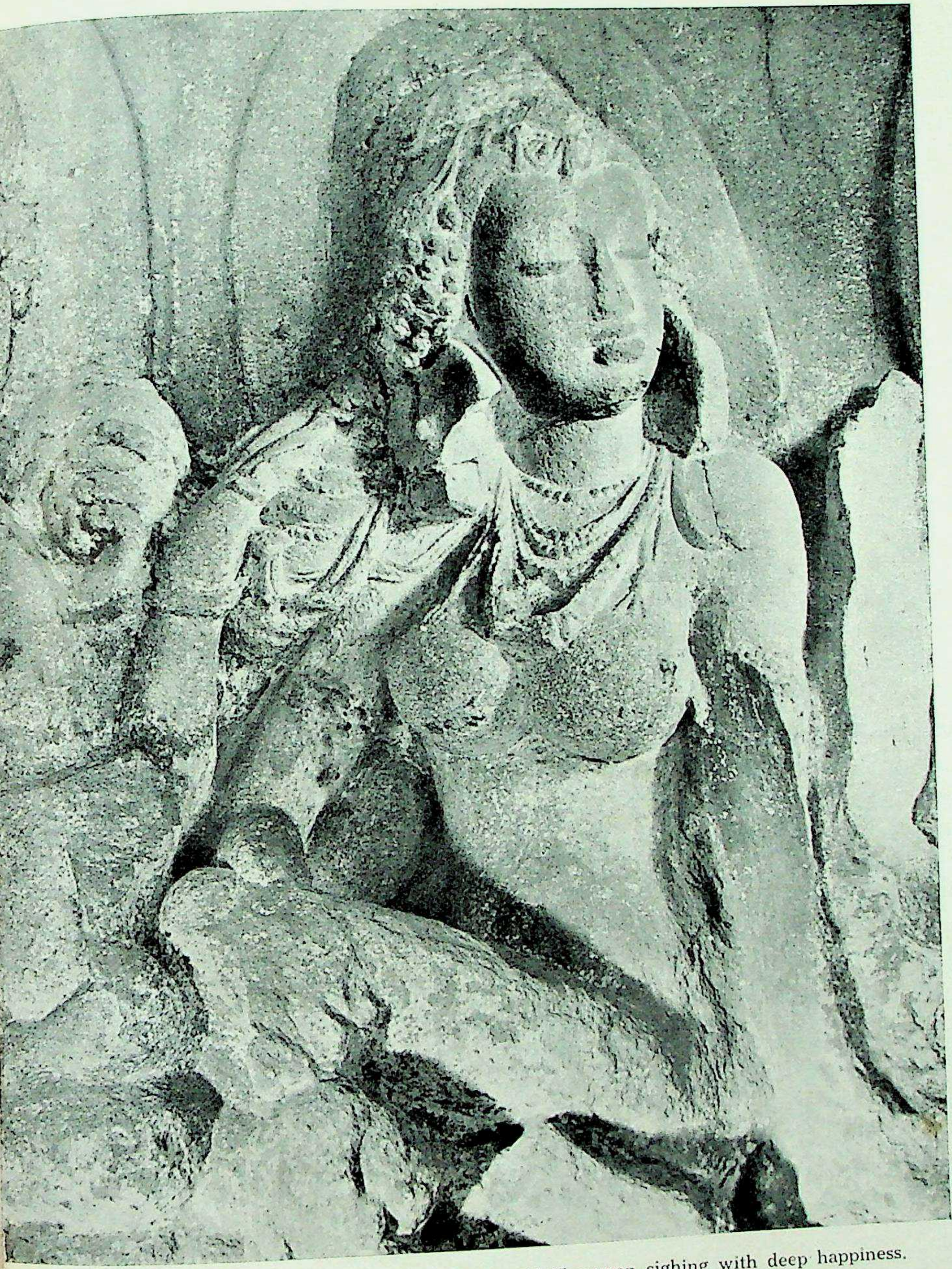
Once more, Hanuman was about to give up his search. Tired and depressed he came out of Ravana's palace, not knowing where to look for Sita. As he was coming out of the gates, Hanuman sighted the garden of Asoka. He did not remember having seen it before, in his search over Lanka. "Perhaps Sita is there, pining away quietly in those lovely surroundings," he thought to himself. Then he jumped lightly over the garden wall, deciding to search there for the last time.

The garden looked lovely. As he jumped from tree to tree, the dew from the leaves fell lightly on his little body, spraying him with tender coolness. The fragrance of flowers in the grove was wafted to over him by the gentle breeze. The birds cooed in happy content. The whole place seemed to be bathed in balmy peace. Suddenly he too felt a quick thrill of joy and anticipation. "Perhaps, I shall find Sita here," he whispered softly. He began to look around. There were lovely fountains there, where the birds fluttered in delight. Trees laden with fruit invited the monkey to a repast. He was tired. He decided to rest on an Asoka tree. As he hid himself amidst the leaves, he saw something shining under the tree. What was it? He looked closely.

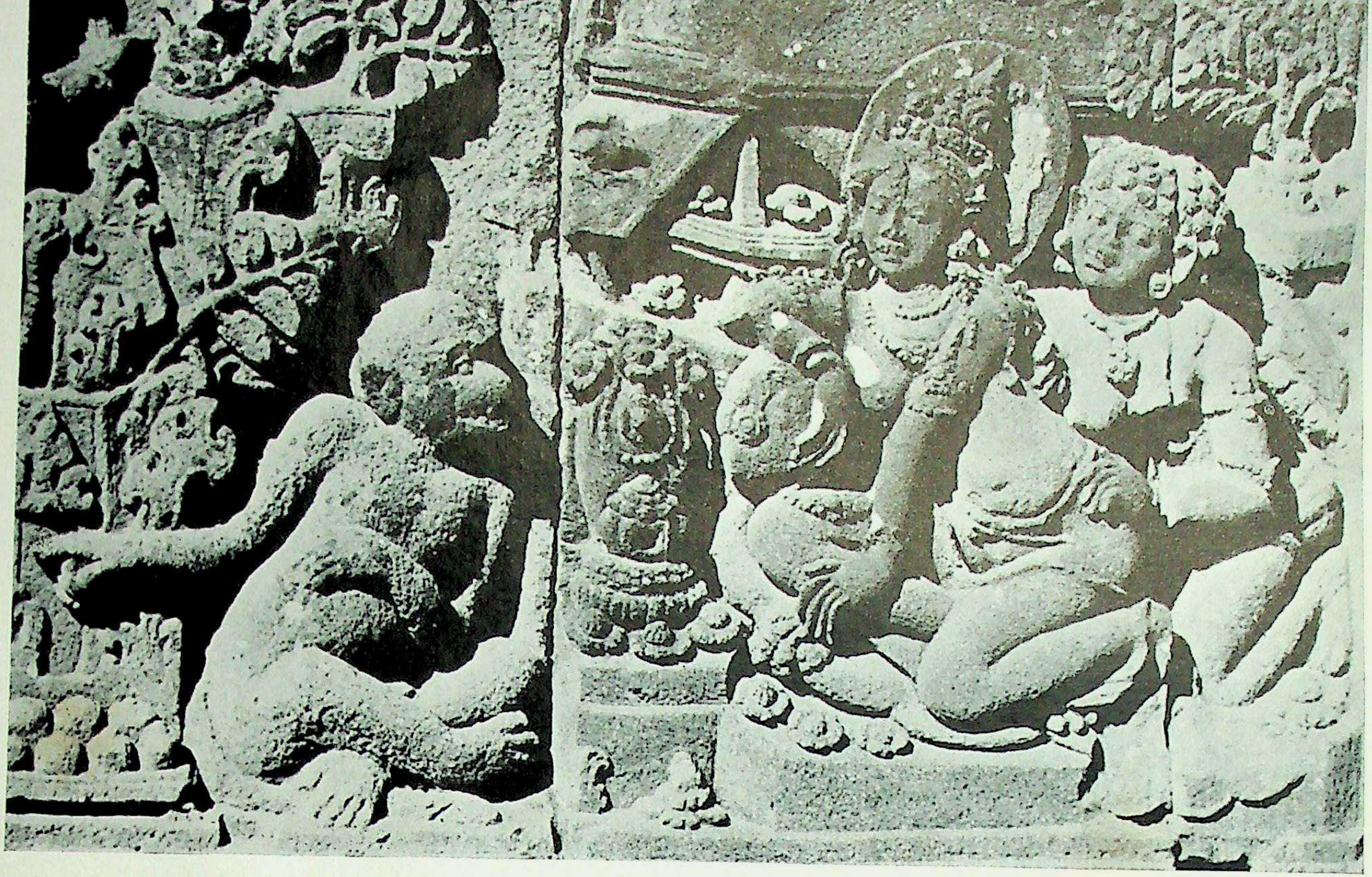
Under the tree, her hair loose, her face in tears, her clothes rent and shabby, he found the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was crying and calling out to Rama in soft tones.

"Sita at last," said Hanuman sighing with deep happiness. Sita was sitting on the golden seat built round the Asoka tree. She was surrounded by ugly looking rakshasis. But she seemed to be noticing nothing. Her eyes were dim and had a faraway look. It was clear she was hoping, praying and waiting for Rama. Her lips were constantly moving whispering the words, "Rama, Lakshmana." Hanuman was touched by the plight of the princess of Ayodhya. He saw how deep her sorrow was. "Truly she must have been going through great tortures. The rakshasis must be terrorizing her," said Hanuman as he saw them surrounding her.

The vanara was wondering how he could manage to meet Sita, when suddenly he heard trumpet calls from all sides. Grey streaks of dawn appeared through the gaps in the trees. The light was slowly spreading in the sky. Ravana was coming to see Sita, the first thing in the morning. The trumpet calls heralded his approach. He came surrounded by handmaids and attendants. He had a noble bearing. He was dressed like a soldier and looked impressive. The white umbrella glimmered above him, shading his face. As he saw Sita, his eyes lit up. Sita shrank, trembling with fear.



27. "Sita at last!" said Hanuman sighing with deep happiness.



28. Could it be true that her day of deliverance had arrived? Was he really a messenger from Rama?

"Dear Sita, why are you afraid of me? You know I love you and await your commands. Order me and I shall obey. All my riches, my life, my kingdom are yours, to do with as you please. Why should you fear me? Rama, that mere man, is not good enough for you. Forget him. He can never reach Lanka and you will not see him. Why grieve for him? You are wasting your beauty and your youth in thus lamenting for him. Look how you have ruined yourself, by fasting and crying! But even in these shabby clothes, with your face all awry and your cheeks stained with tears, you look more beautiful than any one I know. Come, say you will be mine," pleaded Ravana, the mighty king of Lanka.

Then Sita laughed. It was a contemptuous little laugh. "Do you think you are equal to my Rama? You may be a rakshasa who has won boons from God Brahma. You may be powerful. You may possess magic charms and secret weapons, but mark my words, you will fall before my Rama's arrow. Not one of your clan is going to escape the sure aim of his angry darts. I beg you to change your wicked ways. There is still time to mend. Do not invite Rama's anger. Let me warn you that he will come and destroy you and the city of Lanka."

These fiery words of Sita infuriated Ravana. "Sita, you live because I still love you. Or else you would not have escaped death after talking thus of me. Beware! I too warn you. If you do not agree to my wishes, I shall surely cut you up and cook you for my dinner." With these and other threats Ravana took himself off. His face was red with fury and disappointment. Never before had he been thwarted thus by a mere woman. As King of Lanka, every woman he courted had been only too happy to be his wife.

After he had gone, Sita's rakshasi guards pounced on her.

"Stupid woman, why do you insult our king so? You are indeed vain and silly. Don't you know that Ravana is the grandson of the great rishi Paulatsya? His father was the sage Vishravas. He comes from a family of rishis and sages. He himself has won many boons by his penance. He is powerful and great. How foolish of you to refuse him!" said one demon.

" She is an idiot. Just imagine! He is ready to place her at the head of his queens," said another.

"Oh, he even promises her his kingdom and his riches. You are a wicked woman, to be so heartless," said a third demon woman. "Let her go," said a fourth. "We shall eat her up when the time comes and the king gets tired of her."

Hanuman was sorely tempted to beat these tormentors of Sita. But he controlled his anger. He knew he would spoil everything if he started a quarrel with the demons now.

His problem was how to introduce himself to Sita. She would be sure to suspect him. Who would not? Seeing a monkey suddenly come before her and talk to her in human speech, she would be sure to think of him as a rakshasa in disguise. How was it possible to explain to her that the monkeys of Kishkinda possessed many divine gifts? For a long time Hanuman sat wondering what to do.

Meanwhile the demons continued to torment Sita. They bullied her and threatened to eat her up if she did not give in to Ravana's wishes. Sita had so far faced them bravely. But now she felt utterly exhausted. She also felt that there was no more hope of Rama finding her. Better to die quickly rather than fall into Ravana's hands.

It was midnight. The demons around her were sleeping. Quietly, Sita got up and prepared to hang herself from one of the branches of the tree. At this moment, she heard a sweet voice singing in refined tones, the story of Rama. She stopped short in amazement. Who could it be?

"Rama, prince of Ayodhya, with his wife Sita and brother Lakshmana . . . went into exile in order to keep his father's promise. . . ." So began the tale and the voice went on repeating in melodious tones the story of Sita's abduction and Rama's meeting with Sugriva.

Was she dreaming or was someone singing of her Rama?

"Rama is a great archer; he is valorous, strong and true . . . he comes to the aid of his friends. . . . At his sight, his enemies tremble. I see his lotus-like face and his dark tender eyes . . . his beautiful rounded arms. . . I see him walk . . . his gait is like that of a forest elephant . . ." thus sang Hanuman, as he slowly descended from the tree. Walking up to Sita, he bowed to her deeply.

The astonished Sita looked at him in fear. Could it be true? Was it a message from Rama? No . . . No, of course not; it must be Ravana in disguise. "What means this, Ravana? Are you not satisfied with my answers? Why must you play such tricks on me?" she cried with pain.

"Madam, you are mistaken. I am not Ravana, I am what you really see for yourself . . . a monkey. I have come to you as a messenger from Rama, your lord. I am Hanuman, the minister of Sugriva, the monkey king. I have been waiting in this tree, looking for an opportunity to meet you alone. The demons are safely asleep now and we can talk," said Hanuman in a humble voice. Sita could not believe her ears. Could it be true that her day of deliverance had arrived? Was he really a messenger from Rama? How had he crossed the ocean—he, a mere monkey? Alas! Poor Sita had been tricked before and she did not easily believe what she saw before her. How could she forget the false deer and her present plight?

Hanuman begged her to trust him. He described Rama's sorrow, his anger and his vow to kill Ravana. Sita still looked at him with frightened eyes.

At last with trembling fingers, he handed her Rama's ring. At the sight of the ring, Sita was transported with joy. She kissed it and held it close to her breast, thanking Hanuman over and over again.

"Dear Hanuman, forgive me for doubting you. I could not help it. I have been tricked before. Tell me who you are and how you met Rama. Where is he now and when is he coming to rescue me?"

To these eager questions, Hanuman replied in detail and told her the story of Rama's friendship with Sugriva. "Do not worry, dear lady, your bad days will soon be over. Rama will come and kill Ravana. Your heart will be at rest. I promise you, I shall go straight back and give Rama news of you. When he hears how you are suffering he will start at once. Sugriva, our king, is his ally. He has a powerful army of vanaras. These vanaras are gifted with great strength. They are favoured by the gods. I, myself, am the son of the wind-god, and can grow big or small at will." So saying, Hanuman slowly grew in size. "See, madam, I grew to a great size thus, and then jumped over the sea into Lanka. The vanaras of Sugriva's army are bigger and more powerful than me. Do not fear. We shall destroy the rakshasas. I know their power. I have seen Lanka. Yet I say, we shall completely wipe them out."

Hanuman spoke with such conviction that Sita felt more confident. She now began to hope that she would be free some day.

"Tell Rama to come quickly. Ravana has threatened to eat me for his breakfast if I do not agree to be his queen. Of the twelve months time he gave, ten are already over. Only two remain. If Rama comes too late, he will not see me alive," Sita sobbed aloud as she said this.

"Courage, fair lady. We shall come soon. I go straight from here to Rama. Let me say goodbye." At the thought of parting from her newly found friend, Sita cried bitterly.

"How can I bear to stay alone, now that I have found a friend?" said she to the faithful Hanuman.

Then Hanuman had an idea. "Let me take you back. You can ride on my shoulders, while I cross the sea," said he eagerly to Sita.

Sita shook her head sadly. "I do not think that is wise. The rakshasas will try to stop you. You will have to fight, and with me on your back you will find that difficult. Besides, Rama must come and regain me himself. Going back with you thus would be a slight on his fair name. The world will say that Rama could not fight Ravana and win back his wife himself. He must win me by force of arms. Go back, dear monkey, and urge him to come quickly."

Hanuman saw the truth of these words and took leave sadly. He was sorry to leave the lovely princess in the hands of those terrible women. In the short time he had been with her, Hanuman had come to regard Sita with great reverence and affection. He was willing to die for this dear lady. What grace! What charm and above all what love she possessed for her dear lord. What a master Rama was and what a mistress Sita! The monkey sighed.

Then Sita gave him kind messages to take to Lakshmana and to Sugriva, Rama's friend. To Rama, she gave her heart again. "Take this ornament of mine to my lord and remind him of our idyllic days of love at Panchavati. Hurry him to my side, dear Hanuman. You know how to do that better than anyone else," said Sita.

Her distress was too much for Hanuman. He grew furious at the thought of Ravana and his pride. "I shall teach him a lesson before I leave Lanka," he growled to himself, as he walked away. "Let him have a foretaste of Rama's vanara army."

He then began to destroy the fruit trees, the summer houses and the fountains in the garden of Asoka. He enlarged his size and began to uproot trees and buildings. Standing up on one of the ruins, he called out to the rakshasas to come and fight him.

The people of Lanka were disturbed by the unusual noises of walls and trees falling down. The guards in the garden ran into Ravana's palace in alarm. "Some huge monkey is working havoc in our gardens," they cried to the king's chief ministers.

# Chapter Thirteen

Hanuman sat on the broken remains of one of the summer houses. When he saw Ravana's men coming towards him, he grew into an enormous size. Then drawing up his huge tail, he beat it on the ground with a loud battle cry.

"Come, fight me," he said to the rakshasas who ran towards him fully armed. As for Hanuman, he had no arms. He plucked a tree here and a rock there and flung them about him with vigour. Then he wrenched a huge iron pillar from one of the ruins and started beating up the rakshasas. His size and strength were so great that he was able to beat them off quickly.

Ravana sent a famous warrior called Jambumali. Hanuman called to him in glee. "Long live Rama, long live King Sugriva!" he said as he seized a tree to attack him. Jambumali was a good soldier. He fought bravely and well. But Hanuman jumped into the air and, landing on him with a thud, smashed his chariot and reduced his body to pulp.

The rakshasas were amazed to see Hanuman's strength. They did not know he was the son of the wind-god. In great fright they ran to their king with the news.

Ravana was surprised. He knew this was no mean animal. "It must be the devas trying their luck," he thought to himself, and sent his youngest son Aksha to fight the beast.

Now, Aksha was so brave that it was said he was the equal of Ravana himself. He appeared before Hanuman in a wonderful chariot drawn by eight horses. The chariot was made of gold and the horses seemed to be of silver. The young rakshasa prince himself shone with unusual radiance. He fought so well that Hanuman was sorry to have to kill him. He tried to frighten him away. But the prince was most courageous. He rained arrows on Hanuman in an endless stream.

As the fight went on, Hanuman grew more and more in size and strength. He rose in the air, shattering with ease Aksha's arrows by obstructing them with huge rocks and trees. Then he rained stones on the prince, breaking the wonderful chariot to smithereens. Aksha stood on the ground and fought on, aiming cruel shafts at the monkey. But they did not appear to worry Hanuman. His body seemed to be made of iron!

Then Aksha decided to go up in the air himself. Being a rakshasa, he could easily do that. There, he fought the monkey with sword in hand. But he was utterly beaten by Hanuman's steady attacks. He could stand them no longer. At last, with a great cry, he fell on the earth and died.

Ravana was torn with grief, when he heard of Aksha's death. But even in the midst of his sorrow, he realized that this strange monkey must be subdued at once. He, therefore, sent for his other son Indrajit, that famous rakshasa warrior, and begged him to make short work of this nuisance at the Asoka garden.

"Come, hurry, my son," said Ravana. "Who can stand against you, if you are really determined? The gods themselves fly before you. You conquered Indra and brought him here as a prisoner. It is not for nothing you are called Indrajit, the conqueror of Indra. Your knowledge of magic charms is great. You have won great boons from God Brahma by penance and long prayer. Indeed, none can withstand your onslaught. Go, Indrajit, and return victorious. I feel this monkey is no ordinary enemy. Otherwise, he could not have killed Aksha. The usual means of war will not work with him. You may have to use your magic weapons. Remember this well when you are fighting, and do not lose your nerve." So spoke Ravana to his brave son.

Indrajit rose with the joy of anticipation. He had no doubt that he would be victorious. Arming himself, he rode in state to the garden gate.

At the sight of the renowned Indrajit, Hanuman jumped up in joy. "Here is a worthy foe," he said to himself, looming like a giant in the sky. He pulled up more trees and armed himself with pillars from the nearby gate. Indrajit began to shower arrows on Hanuman but they merely glanced away. The prince watched this miracle with astonishment. He had seen few withstand his arrows thus. Then he remembered Ravana's words. Ravana was right, for arrows did not seem to hurt this animal. Nor was he fighting with any weapons. As he was wondering, a huge rock descended on his chariot. His driver was killed. Indrajit made up his mind to waste no more time. He thought of God Brahma, chanted a few verses and aimed an arrow at Hanuman's chest.

At once the son of the wind-god felt something invisible binding him tight. He stopped fighting and, descending to the earth, fell down in a trance. He knew that Indrajit had made him helpless with the famous magic of God Brahma's arrow. But he also knew that it would not bind him for long for he had a counter boon from Brahma that his arrow should not keep him prisoner for more than an hour.

The rakshasas sent up loud cries of victory. They were most relieved and happy. "Trust our prince Indrajit, most valiant of heroes," they shouted as they tied up the huge monkey and dragged him to the court of Ravana. Hanuman bore their insults quietly and submitted to their tortures. He decided that the time had come when he should meet Ravana and do the duty of a king's messenger. He allowed himself to be dragged to the royal presence.

Ravana sat on his jewelled throne, shining with splendour. The rakshasas who surrounded him were also great and powerful. The lustrous Indrajit, the valiant Vibhishana, the commander-in-chief Brihasta were all there, in their shining armour. Hanuman's eyes were dazzled by the sight of so much wealth and power.

"Alas! How wicked Ravana has become; surely he was good once or how else could he have won boons from God Brahma? He must have been pious. But now power has made him arrogant. He has dared to defy Rama," thought Hanuman as he gazed at the court in wonder.

"Who are you, you silly monkey? Who gave you permission to go into my garden? Have you been sent by Indra or was it Kubera? If so, how foolish of them," said Ravana in the voice of thunder.

Hanuman was undaunted by his appearance or his threats.

"I am not from the gods," he replied calmly. "I am from Kishkinda. My king is Sugriva, king of the monkeys. I come as a messenger from Sugriva's friend Rama. He sent me to look for Sita. I found her in your garden weeping bitterly for her lord. Rama and Sugriva are allies. They are determined to wipe out the rakshasa race. Let me warn you, O King of Lanka, you are doomed. If you wish to escape, return Sita to her lawful husband. If not, Lanka will be destroyed and together with it, all of you. You have done an act unworthy of a king. You have stolen another man's wife; it was most dishonourable. Ravana, send back Sita to Rama. Do not perish because of your own wicked deed. You are destroying all your pious deeds, your penance and your prayers. Your boons will not help you now because of your wickedness."

The king of Lanka was incensed by the monkey's words of contempt. "Take this monkey away and kill him at once," he ordered his soldiers.

At this Vibhishana, Ravana's younger brother, intervened. "It is unworthy of a king to treat the messenger of another king in this manner. If you are offended, fight your enemy. What is the point of killing the monkey, a mere messenger? Let him go back and tell Rama how furious you are. That prince is sure to come and attack us with an army. We shall then show our prowess and our strength."

Vibhishana's words went home. Ravana ordered his servants to set fire to the monkey's tail and then let him go. The rakshasas loved nothing better than to torment the huge animal that had worked so much havoc amidst them. Joyfully they wound rags round his tail. How funny! The tail went on growing and they had to get more and more cloth to wind round it. At last the task seemed complete, and soaking it in oil, they set fire to Hanuman's tail. Then they set upon him and beat him as they dragged him along the streets of Lanka. The people came out of their houses and jeered aloud. Secretly they were relieved to see the wicked monkey in chains. Hanuman submitted to all their torments very quietly. He thought he now had a chance to take a good look at the town, its fortifications, its ramparts and moats, its hidden tool dumps, its stone-throwing-machine factories, and so on. He memorized all that he saw, so that he could report in full to King Sugriva. He wondered idly why he was not feeling the burning sensation in his tail. He seemed to feel most cool and comfortable.

Then suddenly he grew impatient of his chains, and shook off the rakshasas like flies from his back. He took gigantic strides towards the sea and, as he went, he set fire to the city of Lanka by swishing his burning tail. At once, the town was in an uproar. The people ran out of the houses. Colossal buildings, palaces and temples began to crumble. Lanka was being burnt to the ground. Valmiki gives a grim description of the city on fire.

Suddenly, as the monkey walked about the charred remains, he thought of Sita and fear gripped his heart. What a fool he had been to burn the city. Was Sita safe or had she too been burnt to death? In his pride and anger at the rakshasas, he had become quite thoughtless of Sita's safety. With great anxiety, he started looking for her again. He sighed with relief when he found her in the Asoka garden. Oh what a wonder! What a miracle! Sita was alive. As she saw him, she smiled bravely through her tears. "They told me about your tail. I prayed to the god of fire not to hurt you. Are you all right?" she asked.

Hanuman bowed to her. He knew now that it was Sita's prayer that had saved him from burns. "Thank god you are safe! Naturally, how can the fire-god hurt you, when you yourself burn with the pure light of the great?" said Hanuman in fervent admiration. He then took leave of her, promising to come back soon with Rama and the army of monkeys.

"Hurry," said Sita. "Remember my days are numbered."

Hanuman reluctantly left her to cross the seas once more. When he reached the shore, he dipped his tail into the water and paused a while to think. "I must go back as quickly as possible," he said to himself. He found a good hill nearby, and climbing it, took a neat jump into the air.

When the monkeys waiting on the other coast saw Hanuman's enormous shape in the distance, they set up yells of delight.

Joyous shouts resounded among the rocks on the seashore and, as if in answer, Hanuman gave a tremendous shout from his side. The monkeys jumped about with glee. They were sure he had been victorious when they heard him give that enormous roar. Eagerly, they climbed the mountain peak, where Hanuman was about to land.

Jambavan, one of the oldest bears in the bear divisions of Sugriva's army, welcomed Hanuman with open arms.

"I have seen her," cried that valiant monkey as he came down amidst cheers.

"I have seen her. I have spoken to her," he said again with happy satisfaction.

"Tell us! Tell us!" cried Angada and the other monkeys, crowding round the hero who had now earned everlasting fame for himself. He told them in detail of the perils he had met, the scene at the garden of Asoka, the battle with the rakshasas and the burning of Lanka.

"But, comrades, all this I was able to do because of Sita. It is her courage and her prayer that won for me the aid of the gods in my task. Without that I would have been helpless. Oh, my dear friends, how can I describe to you the beauty of Rama's wife, her sorrow, or the divine light that shines in her eyes. How lucky I am to be the first to see her. Oh, my dear friends, she is in despair. We must hasten to her rescue."

"Let us go to King Sugriva at once and report, so that he may start for Lanka without waste of time," the others cried.

Away went the monkey hordes, almost running all their way to Kishkinda. Jumping across rivers, climbing hills and crossing streams, they reached Kishkinda in a short time.

Now, outside the lovely city of Kishkinda was a beautiful vine garden. Here there grew lovely grapes, specially meant for the king's table. His wine too came from the same vineyard. Into this the monkey hordes entered with whoops of delight. Unthinkingly, they worked havoc in the garden, drinking the wine, eating the grapes and beating up the guards. The guards ran to King Sugriva in perplexity. "Our own monkeys are destroying the garden. They seem to be in a most drunken mood," they declared.

On hearing this, Sugriva's knitted brow relaxed. His face dissolved in smiles. "I see they have been most successful and are destroying the vineyard in an intoxication of joy," he remarked. Then hastening to the cave where Rama lived he reported the return of the monkey division that had gone South.

Rama, Sugriva and Lakshmana hurriedly went out to meet Hanuman. They met him halfway.

"I have seen her, dear Rama," said Hanuman bowing to the ground reverently. He placed in Rama's hands the jewel that had held Sita's lovely hair. When Rama saw the ornament that used to shine in Sita's thick tresses, he burst into a flood of happy tears. A thousand memories crowded into his mind. "Oh Hanuman, dearest of friends, how can I repay you? You have given me life again. Without hopes of ever meeting Sita, I was about to die," he said to that valiant hero. Then he took the rough hairy body of the faithful vanara and hugged him tightly. Lakshmana stood by, transported with joy.

"Tell me all. Where did you see her? How did you find her? Are the rakshasas torturing her too much? Tell me. I am burning to hear," cried Rama.

Hanuman recounted his adventures once more.

"Rama, I cannot tell you in words what Sita is suffering because of her separation from you. A group of rakshasis are guarding her day and night. They goad her ceaselessly to be Ravana's queen. Sita resists with all her might, crying bitterly for her Rama. When she saw me, she wanted to know why you hadn't yet come to set her free. "Why does Rama tarry? Ask him to hurry. I have just two months to live," said your most wonderful wife to me. I think, Rama, we must call a council of war at once."

Sugriva grasped the sense of Hanuman's speech. Soon Kishkinda resounded with the war cries of thousands of monkeys. Sugriva prepared his army very carefully. He divided them into monkey divisions and bear divisions, for he commanded both. He picked them carefully, selecting the best, the strongest and the bravest. He was determined to win. Hanuman gave Rama and Sugriva a detailed account of the rakshasa forces and defences. He told them of Lanka's wealth and power, of the rakshasas' magic charms, of their secret weapons, of their armoury and their discipline and skill. He gave vivid details of the strength of their army, elephants and horses. He told them in no uncertain terms of the valour of the rakshasas, especially of Indrajit. Finally, he gave them a true picture of Ravana, that matchless demon, that terror of the gods. He told them how the rakshasas loved and respected Ravana and how they would fight for him unto death.

Sugriva now knew that it was no mean task to attack the famous stronghold of Lanka. He chose his men with care, informed them fully of the rakshasa ways of fighting and how to foil their plans.

Soon the great army of Sugriva was ready and left Kishkinda with Rama, Lakshmana and the monkey king at its head. As they marched, they raised huge columns of dust, shaking the earth and breaking the clouds with their loud clamour. Rama and Sugriva gave strict orders that the land through which they passed should be left undisturbed. It was Ravana they were after. Why should the innocent folks on the way be molested for no fault of their own? Time enough for destruction when they reach Lanka.

The monkey army reached the southern shores. They decided to camp there, while Sugriva and Rama thought out the next move. The most difficult problem now facing them was the crossing of the sea. How were they to do this? The monkeys numbered thousands, and few, if any, of them were strong enough to jump the seas like Hanuman. A way must be found to bridge the ocean. They had little time left. Rama brooded over this obstacle.

He thought of Sita across the sea. "Lakshmana," he whispered to his dear brother, "Sita is so near yet so far away. I am helpless. I fear our army cannot cross. Will I be able to reach her in time, before Ravana devours her for his meal? Oh, dear brother, how I pine and burn for my dear lady! How I long for Sita. The very breeze of this seashore seems to whisper her name. I feel her touch on my cheeks and I hear her lament in the wail of the ocean waves."

To Lakshmana fell the task of once more comforting Rama.

Meanwhile, Sugriva placed guards round the army camp. "Be alert, the rakshasas might come to scout around. The enemy is just across the sea," he warned his next in command. And sure enough, the monkeys did sight some Rakshasa spies. Ravana was sending them in batches. For he was worried and was wondering how to meet the attack of the enemy. He was aware of the arrival of the monkey hordes and their preparations to cross over.

# Chapter Fourteen

Ravana was holding a council of war in his assembly hall. His brothers, his sons, his army commanders and his ministers were all there.

Ravana spoke aloud, in a voice full of confidence. He hid nothing. "All of you are aware what great trouble the monkey Hanuman gave us. From what he did we have an idea of what Rama's army would be like. I hear they have reached the other coast. My spies are daily bringing me reports. I believe the monkey army is as large as the ocean itself. All the same, I have no doubt we can defeat them. But I would now like you to give me your advice. For I feel certain that by some means or the other, Rama's army will cross over to Lanka and we must be ready to meet them." The rakshasa heroes then began to give their opinions. Each vied with the other in telling the king how he would destroy the enemy.

"Be at peace, king. We shall kill the enemy for you," said one.

"I alone shall go over and finish them off even now," boasted Nikamba, Ravana's nephew.

"Why bother? Just send a battalion of rakshasas across. After all, they are only monkeys," said Brihasta, the commander-in-chief.

At this stage, Vibhishana got up and spoke in a subdued voice.

"King, what your friends are saying is very flattering. No doubt they are great warriors. But think. Hanuman too was no mean warrior. It is no use trying to laugh away the heroic deeds performed by this one monkey. All of us saw what he was capable of. Besides, you did wrong to bring Rama's wife here. We have no right to fight her husband when he comes to claim her. Give Sita back to Rama and live in peace."

Ravana did not like these words. "What kind of a brother are you? You are belittling my strength and praising the enemy's heroism," he cried in wrath.

"Brother, I warn you that you are taking the wrong path. Sita should be returned," said Vibhishana firmly.

At this stage, Kumbhakarna, Ravana's other brother got up to speak. Kumbhakarna was a terror both on earth and in heaven. The gods literally fled at his approach. His proportions were gigantic and he possessed the strength of a hundred elephants. As he walked the earth shook. It was a mercy that as a result of a curse from God Brahma, he slept for six months in the year. Otherwise, the havoc he worked would have turned the land into a sea of blood. Kumbhakarna too, like his brothers, was pious and learned. One could even say he was shrewd, though he might not have been as wise as Vibhishana. At this juncture, he too felt as Vibhishana did. His words, however, were slightly different.

"King, you have acted unwisely. If you wished for Sita, you should have fought and killed the brothers Rama and Lakshmana before taking her. How is it that you did not do so? A king like you is capable of defeating even such foes as Rama and Lakshmana. Had you done so, Sita would have been yours without your begging her to be so. . . ."

When Ravana heard Kumbhakarna's words, he looked a bit ashamed of himself. He valued Kumbhakarna more than Vibhishana, because he was a better fighter. He bowed his head in thought for a moment, and then said in an obstinate tone, "I cannot give up Sita, as Vibhishana advises."

As Ravana asserted himself loudly thus, those assembled looked at him in fear. What was the king up to? they wondered.

Kumbhakarna felt sorry for Ravana. He said in a more friendly voice. "Do not fear, Ravana. Right or wrong, you are my brother and I shall fight to defend you. However, I must tell you that I think Rama is a matchless archer and it is difficult to defeat him."

"Ministers," said Ravana, "I cannot give up Sita. I admit I am enamoured of her and will not part with her. I have begged her to be my queen but in vain. I have waited for nearly a year and now I feel I am too proud to surrender her and accept defeat. I prefer to fight."

"We are with you," said those assembled there, partly from fear of Ravana and partly in the hope of sharing his victory. Vibhishana alone raised a protest.

Ravana's wrath knew no bounds. He abused his brother. "I have always heard that relatives forsake one while one is in trouble. How well you are proving that saying, Vibhishana. I suspect you are a coward and a traitor. I believe you would like to join Rama against me. But for me you would not be living in such pomp and glory as you do today. Yet you seem to be plotting against me. What is a brother who does not help in the time of need? Now that I am in trouble, you want to fly or advise the coward's way out. Away, Vibhishana. Let me not see you in Lanka any more."

Poor Vibhishana was very unhappy. He felt sure that Ravana was doomed. He also feared that he was no longer safe in Lanka. He decided to go to Rama and surrender to his will. "If I must be obliged to someone, it is better that it be to Rama than Ravana," he thought. He left Lanka for good with four faithful followers.

The monkeys sighted Vibhishana travelling in the air with his four companions. They thought these must be Ravana's spies and set up shouts of warning, threatening to kill them. Vibhishana spoke to them as he floated in the air.

"I am Vibhishana, brother of Ravana. I have come not to fight Rama but to join him. My brother has driven me away, because I advised him to return Sita to her lawful lord. I have come, leaving my wife and children and my beloved city of Lanka to seek Rama's protection. If Rama does not accept me, I am lost, for Ravana will kill me in no time."

Vibhishana's message was conveyed to Rama. Sugriva advised Rama not to accept him. "After all, he is the demon king's brother and blood is thicker than water. How can we trust him?" he said. Rama smiled at this remark. Other monkey chieftains were also of the same mind.

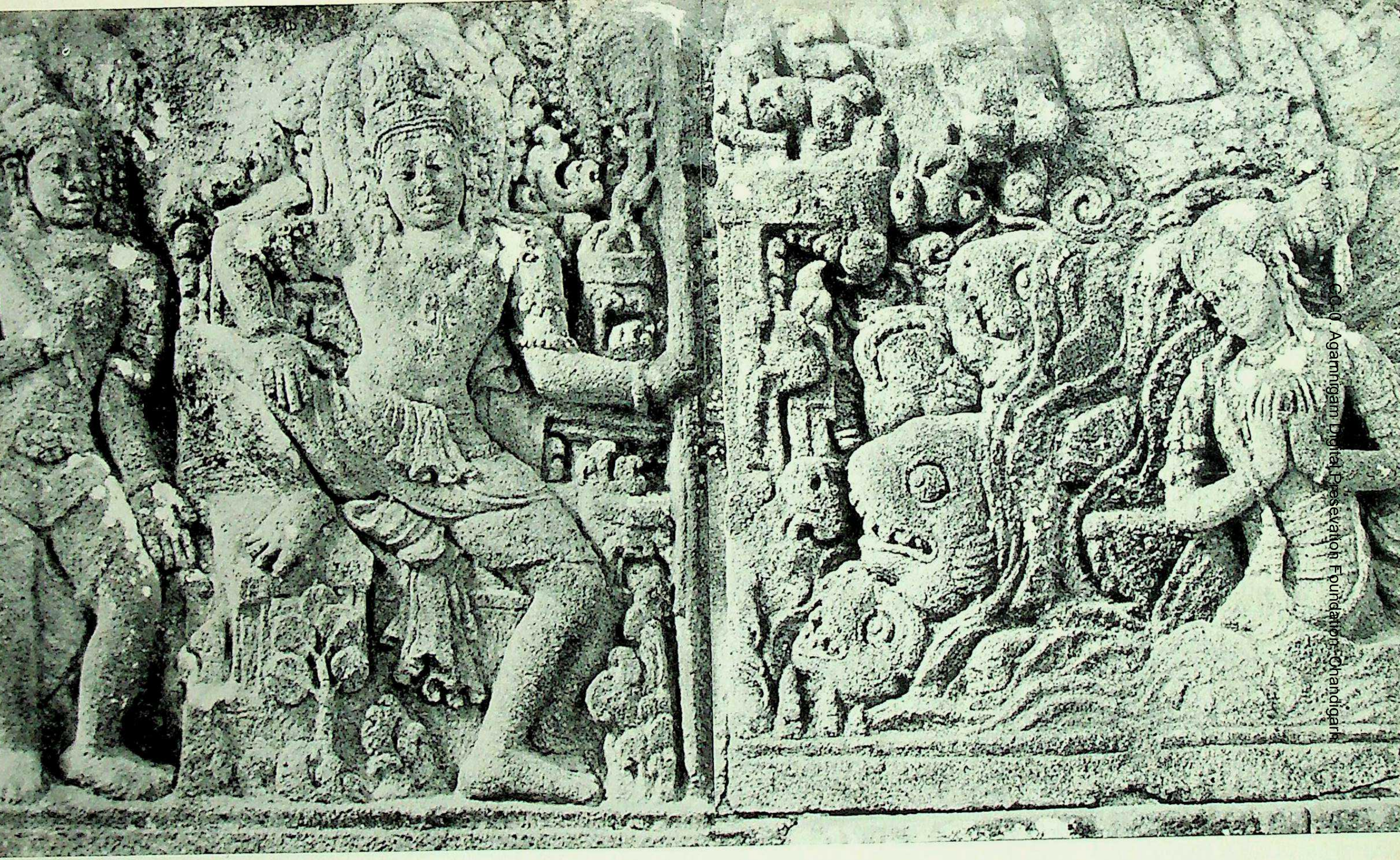
Hanuman, however, thought differently. "Rama, I saw Vibhishana at Ravana's court. I respect him and would believe him if he himself declares he needs protection. I was struck by his wise words, calm manner and gentle speech. He was the one who advised letting me go while the others were for killing me. I believe him when he says he advised Ravana to release Sita. I am sure he did so and the demon king got furious with him because of it. I think we shall find him grateful and we can use him. Accept him," he said.

Rama agreed. He too felt that Vibhishana was honest. "Besides," he said, "I never refuse those who seek my protection. I feel it my duty to help Vibhishana, who is now homeless. Let him come."

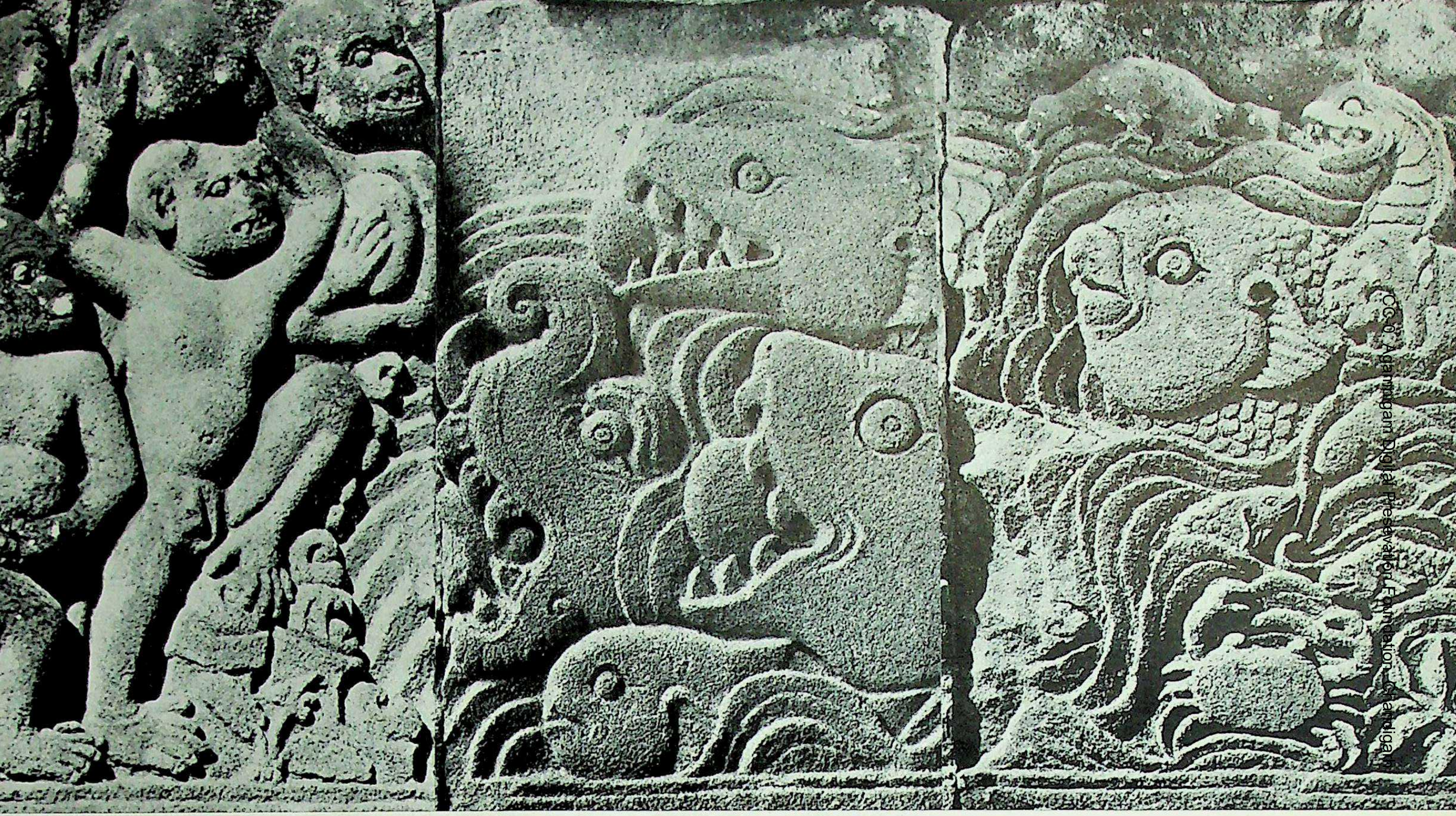
"But how can we trust one who has been false to his brother? Vibhishana has quarrelled with his brother and seeks us. I am sure he even covets Ravana's throne," said Sugriva.

"Why not, what is the harm? I shall promise it to him as I did Kishkinda to you." With these words Rama looked at Lakshmana with a meaningful smile. Lakshmana smiled in return. "Lead Vibhishana here," said Rama once again.

After these words from Rama, the monkeys accepted the demon prince without reserve. He descended and, reaching Rama quickly, fell at his feet. Rama welcomed him warmly. "You are one of us. And



29. "Rama, spare me. Control your anger. I shall help you" cried the sea-god.



30. Thousands of monkeys uprooted trees and brought rocks and stones of all sizes. All the animals helped to build the bridge.

I promise you, just as I promised Sugriva, that I shall kill Ravana and make you the king of Lanka."

Rama knew that though Vibhishana wished Ravana well, he would like to have the throne of Lanka if anything befell him. And knowing Rama's skill, Vibhishana must have had a pretty good idea of what would happen.

"Lakshmana," Rama said, turning to his brother, "you will not find another Bharata even if you search the whole world." Rama sighed sadly at the thought of his absent brother. Who could equal Bharata in selfless love and devotion?

Now Ravana did a stupid thing, unworthy of a person of his intelligence. He sent one of his ministers to try and persuade Sugriva to abandon Rama and join his side.

Sugriva was furious, and the monkeys only mocked the messenger. "Do you think our king betrays his friends? Go and tell your Ravana that there is no coward in the vanara army who will turn traitor. Let him know that he is fighting true soldiers."

Ravana's minister tried to slip away quickly. The monkeys, however, were loth to let him go. They would have killed him but for Rama's compassion.

"Let him go. He is not to be blamed for Ravana's faults," said that kind prince.

Vibhishana joined Rama's council. After long debates, it was decided to ask the ocean king for help to cross the sea.

Accordingly, Rama started a three-day vigil, invoking the ocean god. But the sea-god did not appear and Rama grew impatient. As the days went by he was filled with fear for Sita and could not bear to be idle. His anger against the ocean mounted and then became fierce. Stringing his bow, he sent a trail of arrows into the depths of the sea. The ocean foamed with the force of Rama's matchless arrows. Countless fish were thrown up. The ocean king at last appeared on the surface.

"Rama, spare me. Control your anger. I shall help you," he cried. "Let the monkeys build a bridge of stones and rocks and trees. I shall keep it together and see that your army passes over in safety. Nila, one of the monkey chiefs, is good at bridge-making. Let him direct all the operations," advised the sea-god.

"It was a sight to see the monkeys building the bridge," remarks the sage Valmiki. Thousands of monkeys and bears uprooted trees and brought rocks and stones of all sizes to fill in the gaps. All the animals helped. The poet says even the birds and the squirrels helped to carry their tiny bit for the building of the bridge. And the sea helped to keep it in place. For five days they worked, while Rama stood by watching them eagerly.

Then the bridge was finished. The monkeys crossed over to Lanka. Skirting the hill of Svala, they entered the forest next to Lanka. The wild animals of that forest ran amok in terror before the advance of the huge vanara hordes. Then from a place of vantage, for the first time, Rama caught a glimpse of the famous city of Lanka. There it was, glowing like a jewel hanging on the silvery sky. On a high hill stood the well-fortified city of Lanka, shining with splendour.

Rama was kept informed by vanara spies from time to time of Ravana's moves. He knew now that the four gates of Lanka were guarded by Brihasta, Mahodara, Indrajit and Ravana respectively. He, therefore, appointed Nila, Angada and Hanuman to attack three of the gates, taking upon himself the gate defended by Ravana. "Attack these gates and let us enter Lanka in mass," he said to his faithful followers.

"Alas! Ravana is about to meet his end by his own foolishness. What a beautiful city this is! I feel sorry I have to destroy it," said Rama to Lakshmana. Lakshmana was amazed to see the strong fortifications of the city. Rakshasa hordes moved on the ramparts, day and night, guarding the entrances and keeping a strict lookout for the enemy.

"How rich Ravana must be to build such a gorgeous town!" exclaimed Sugriva.

"What a pity a whole city is doomed because of one man's fault," said Vibhishana in a sad voice.

Suddenly without warning Sugriva rose in the air and in a trice he was above Lanka. The demon king was holding court and was surprised to see a monkey suddenly appear in the sky.

"I have caught you, Ravana. Come, you cannot escape. You must fight," cried Sugriva to Ravana.

There followed the most wonderful wrestling bout that anybody could dream of. Ravana could box well and so could Sugriva. They fought untiringly, until Ravana decided to use his magic. At this, Sugriva grew alert and recovering himself, jumped back to safety, amidst his own men.

Rama welcomed him with happiness.

"Sugriva, you must not do such fool-hardy things. We cannot afford to lose you," exclaimed Rama.

"I was just beside myself with rage at the thought of that treacherous demon, who took away your wife. I forgot I had not your orders to go," he said in apology.

Rama then sent Angada to Ravana to see for the last time whether he would yield. This was the practice of the time—to send a messenger of peace, just before opening the fight.

Angada flew in turn into Ravana's court.

"I am Angada, son of Vali, Ravana. You need know no more, for you knew my father well. He made you tremble, I declare. Well, here I am as the messenger of peace from Rama, prince of Ayodhya. He asks you for the last time to let Sita go and submit to him. If you don't, prepare for your death, for it is near at hand."

Ravana rose from his seat in great wrath. "Hold him, kill him," he ordered his men.

But Angada did not wait. He caught hold of the two men who were about to attack him and, jumping into the air, he dropped them like ripe plums into the moat below. Then, rising further, he kicked the palace dome and floated back to Rama.

It was now war. Rama engaged himself in deciding the positions of the various vanara forces. Sugriva, Lakshmana and Vibhishana were posted to different sections.

They were about to attack the stronghold of Lanka.

# Chapter Fifteen

Ravana sent out clever spies into the enemy camp to find out their strength. They went into Rama's army disguised as monkeys and began to look round the place.

Vibhishana spotted them and would have killed them, but for Rama. "These are poor men who are just doing their master's bidding. Why kill them?" he said. Then turning to the spies, he asked them to learn the vanara strength full well and report to their king. "Warn your king of the danger in which he stands," he said to them.

The spies went back to Ravana. "Great king, it is difficult to fight the vanaras. Sugriva and Angada are terribly powerful. It is said the gods help them. As for Hanuman, you already know of his bravery. Rama does not look like an ordinary prince, nor does Lakshmana. King, we fear that something more than we can see is aiding them. How did these monkeys cross the ocean? The building of the bridge seems a miracle. Have you ever heard the like of it? We beg you to think carefully before going on with the fight. Why not return the princess to Rama?"

"Cowards, fools, knaves!" shouted Ravana in rage. "I will not let Sita go even if Indra himself comes and asks for her. Don't you know, you idiots, that I am stronger than the gods? I have defeated them. I fear none in the three worlds."

He lost his head completely. Pride blinded him. Rather than give in to Rama, a mere man, he said, he would die fighting.

"I shall prepare for battle," he cried in a final voice of thunder. But even then his desire for Sita overcame him.

He decided, once more, to persuade Sita. He would cajole her; then frighten her, if necessary, to surrender. He walked into the garden of Asoka with great hopes. "Sita, I fear Rama is dead. The vanara army is no more. I have smashed it completely. Give up all thought of Rama and be my queen," he begged.

Sita looked at him incredulously.

"You do not trust my words. Look, here is Rama's head," he said and held up to her a magic head that looked exactly like Rama's.

Even then Sita refused to believe that the prince of Ayodhya could be killed so easily. But Ravana could not linger very long by her side. Messengers hastened to him to say that the enemy was at the gate. Ravana had to leave in a hurry.

Vibhishana's wife who was one of Sita's guards reassured her. "It cannot be Rama. I am sure it is one of Ravana's tricks. Be at rest," she said.

As if to confirm her words, the battle cries of the vanara army reached Sita at that moment. Oh! how it gladdened her heart. "My Rama is here at last," she whispered with a thankful sigh.

Ravana went up to the topmost parapet of his palace walls in order to review the enemy's strength. His ministers went with him. One of them pointed out to him the various divisions and sections of the vanara army. "These monkeys and bears have come from all parts of the world. They are brave and faithful. They adore Rama and are ready to die for him. See how impatient they are for battle. There is Rama, shining like a dark jewel amidst the sea of hairy monkeys. Beside him is Lakshmana, fair, strong and courageous. He is second only to Rama in war. Both brothers learnt the art of war from the Rishi Viswamitra. Near Rama and Lakshmana stands Sugriva. He is Vali's brother. On his breast is the necklace that Indra gave Vali. He is as powerful as Vali, and you know Vali's strength."

As the ministers spoke, Ravana's pride rose high. He felt sure of himself. "We shall destroy them," he said with great firmness. Then he ordered the charge.

At the same time, Rama was thinking of Sita within the fort of Lanka and with grim determination decided to attack.

The monkeys gave out war cries and rushed to the walls of the city. Some attacked the gates with clubs while others tried to break the walls with huge pieces of rock.

The rakshasas came out in hordes to defend their city. They were armed to the teeth. The vanaras, however, fought them with their nails and fists. They also used clubs and huge stones. The war had started in good earnest. Soon the ground was covered with dead bodies. Blood flowed in streams.

Many heroes fought separate duels! Angada against Indrajit, Hanuman against Brihasta, Nila against Nikumba, and so on. Indrajit's chariot and horses were destroyed. Angada was hit by Indrajit's club. Hanuman fell for a minute, but soon got up and resumed his destructive fury. Sukshena, a monkey chief, killed a rakshasa hero single-handed, fighting only with stones and rocks.

Night set in, but the battle raged on. Angada wrecked Indrajit's chariot for the second time. His driver was killed. When they saw the brave deeds of their prince, the monkey army gave shouts of joy.

Indrajit was annoyed. He was not used to defeat. He, therefore, decided to use his magic lore. He rose up in the air and making himself invisible, began to rain arrows on the monkey army. The vanaras began to quail before these arrows which seemed to come from all directions. Pressing his advantage, Indrajit aimed his famous "snakecharm" arrows at Rama and Lakshmana, who fell down unconscious. At the sight of the two wounded princes, lying as if dead on the ground, the vanara army was shaken with panic and was about to flee.

Vibhishana tried to rally them. He moved round, explaining that Rama and Lakshmana were not dead. "They have been struck by Indrajit's poisoned arrows. But this poison does not kill. They are merely unconscious. Soon they will rise up to lead you. Do not lose heart," he urged. These words quietened the vanaras.

Sugriva called the army to order. "What kind of soldiers are you to lose heart so easily? What will Rama think about you when he wakes up?" he admonished them.

The vanaras felt ashamed of themselves. With renewed courage they fell back into their ranks and keyed themselves up for a fresh attack.

Meanwhile, Indrajit ran to his father in great joy. "Father, they are finished. I have felled the two princes with my 'snakecharm' arrows," he cried. Ravana jumped up and embraced his son. Together they came out to the palace balcony and told the people of their great victory. Ravana then ordered Sita's guards to take her over the battlefield in the flying chariot, so that she might see for herself the plight of her husband. When Sita saw Rama and Lakshmana stretched out in the mud outside the city walls, she could not contain her sobs. "All hope is now gone. We are lost, Kausalya, Sumitra and I. All of us are now left to moan in sorrow. Oh, Rama, dear hero, how could this have happened? All the great rishis we met told me you were unconquerable. How can their words prove false? Oh, my matchless prince, I cannot bear to see your lotus face so pale and lifeless," cried Sita in an agony of sorrow.

Vibhishana's daughter who was with Sita, implored her not to give in to grief. "I swear to you they are not dead. They have been made unconscious by Indrajit's 'snakecharm' arrows. Look at their faces! There is still light in them. Do they look dead?"

Sita was somewhat pacified.

The gods were not idle, it seemed. For suddenly, the earth shook, the sea roared and there was a terrific gale. Garuda, the divine eagle, flew down majestically and with his wings tenderly embraced the princes.

Now, this bird knew the secret cure to Indrajit's special poison. As he whispered the mantras into the ears of Rama and Lakshmana, they rubbed their eyes for a while and sprang up as if waking from a refreshing sleep. Sugriva felt immensely relieved. Acting as if nothing had happened, Rama and Lakshmana picked up their bows and arrows, and urged the army forward. The battlefield rang again with the war cries of Sugriva's army.

Ravana was taken aback by the renewed din of battle; the vanara hordes were once more pounding at the walls of Lanka. Recovering from the surprise, he ordered Dhumraksha to the west gate to repulse Hanuman's attack. Dhumraksha hurried at the head of a big battalion and attacked the vanaras savagely. In the fierce battle that followed, hundreds died on both sides. The air was thick with dust. The ground was covered with blood. Swords clashed and cries filled the battlefield. Hanuman fought like a giant. He killed Dhumraksha with his bare fist, reducing him to pulp.

Not daunted, Ravana sent Vajra to the south gate, which was being battered by Angada. Another bloody battle was fought. Vanara heroes fought with rare courage and rakshasas died like flies. Though Vajra killed hundreds of vanaras, he was doomed. Angada gave him a mortal blow with his club and felled him to the ground.

A series of bloody encounters took place. Thousands of vanaras fell to the varied and charmed weapons of the rakshasas. But they were not to be disheartened. Fighting with uprooted trees and stones they gave as good as they got. Ravana got impatient, and ordered his commander-in-chief, Brihasta, to take the field in person. A fierce hand-to-hand fight ensued between him and the Vanara chief, Nila, who finally broke Brihasta's skull with a huge stone

With the death of their commander-in-chief, the rakshasa lines broke up in confusion. They fled back in haste, hoping for protection from Ravana. The battle seemed as good as lost. The time had come for Ravana himself to take a hand. He sallied forth in his chariot with Indrajit by his side and followed by his guards. Many vanaras fell back before his onslaught, Nila among them. Lakshmana himself was wounded and had to be removed to a place of safety. Rama now emerged into the field riding on Hanuman's shoulders. Arrows flew like sparks. The strength and sureness of Rama's arrows began to tell.

Thrown from his chariot, his weapons destroyed, Ravana stood alone in the battlefield, unarmed and with bent head. "Go back, Ravana, and return tomorrow with all your weapons. I cannot kill a defenceless enemy," said Rama.

This supreme act of heroism drew loud cheers from the vanaras.

Ravana went back silently. Fear, a feeling he had never known, grew in his heart. He felt the time had come when he should call Kumbhakarna to his help.

Now, Kumbhakarna was in deep sleep. The rakshasas tried to wake him up by driving chariots and elephants over him. But Kumbhakarna's huge body hardly felt them. He continued in deep slumber.

The rakshasas then prodded him with knives and blew trumpets near his ears. At last he stirred. Then they started jumping and walking over his cumbersome figure. Kumbhakarna moved as if he had just become aware of a faint disturbance. He opened his eyes and rubbed them. At the sight of the rakshasas worrying him thus, he lost his temper and was about to beat them up, when one of them, more brave than the rest, ventured to explain the situation to him.

When Kumbhakarna heard the news, he laughed in a most careless manner. "How is it that my valorous brother is frightened by mere monkeys? Just wait till I reach the battlefield." And he shook his enormous body into wakefulness.

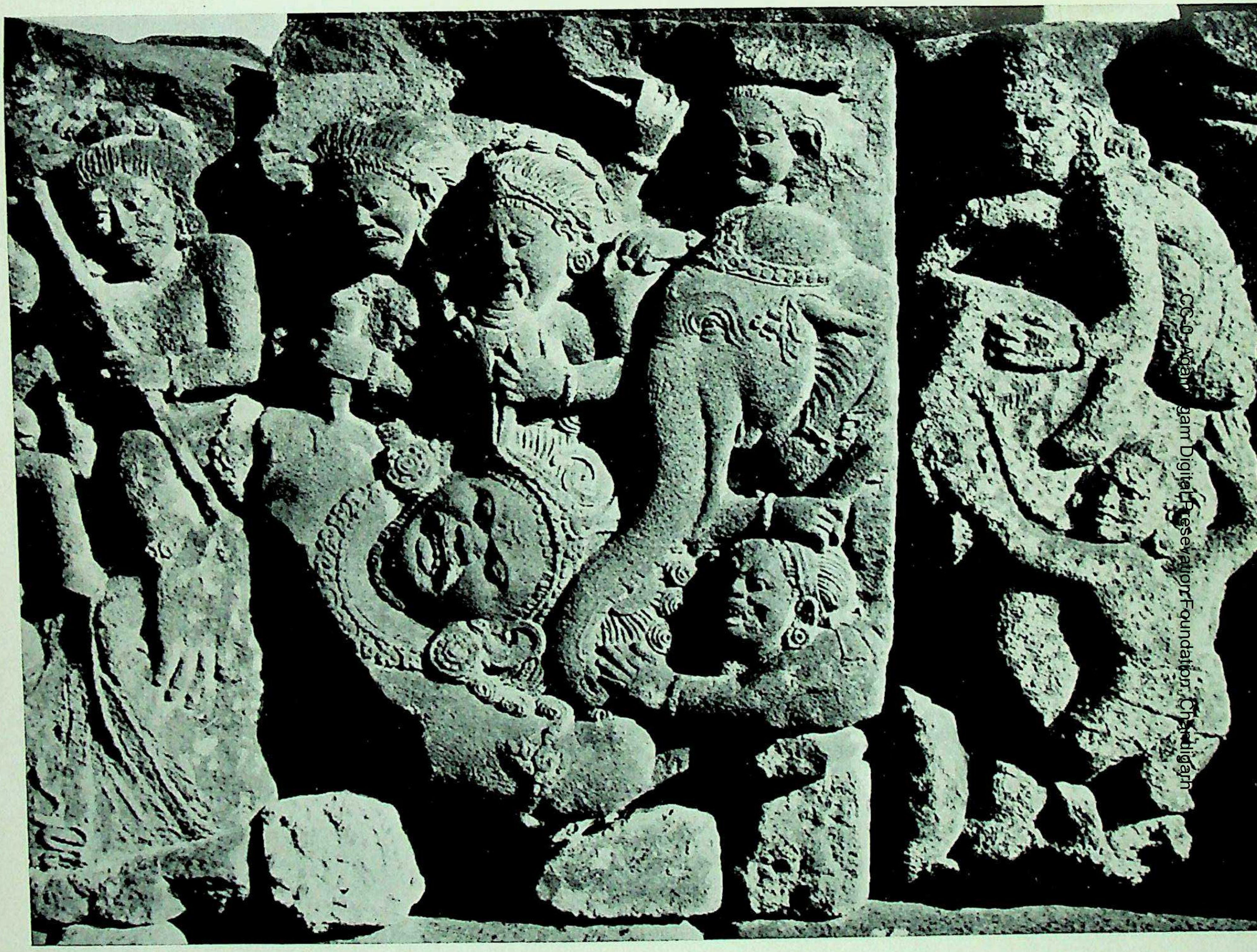
Ravana sprang from his throne when he saw his famous brother.

"Kumbhakarna, I am worried. The enemy is at our gates and what is more he has destroyed some of our greatest warriors. Even I was overpowered. What shall I do?" he asked.

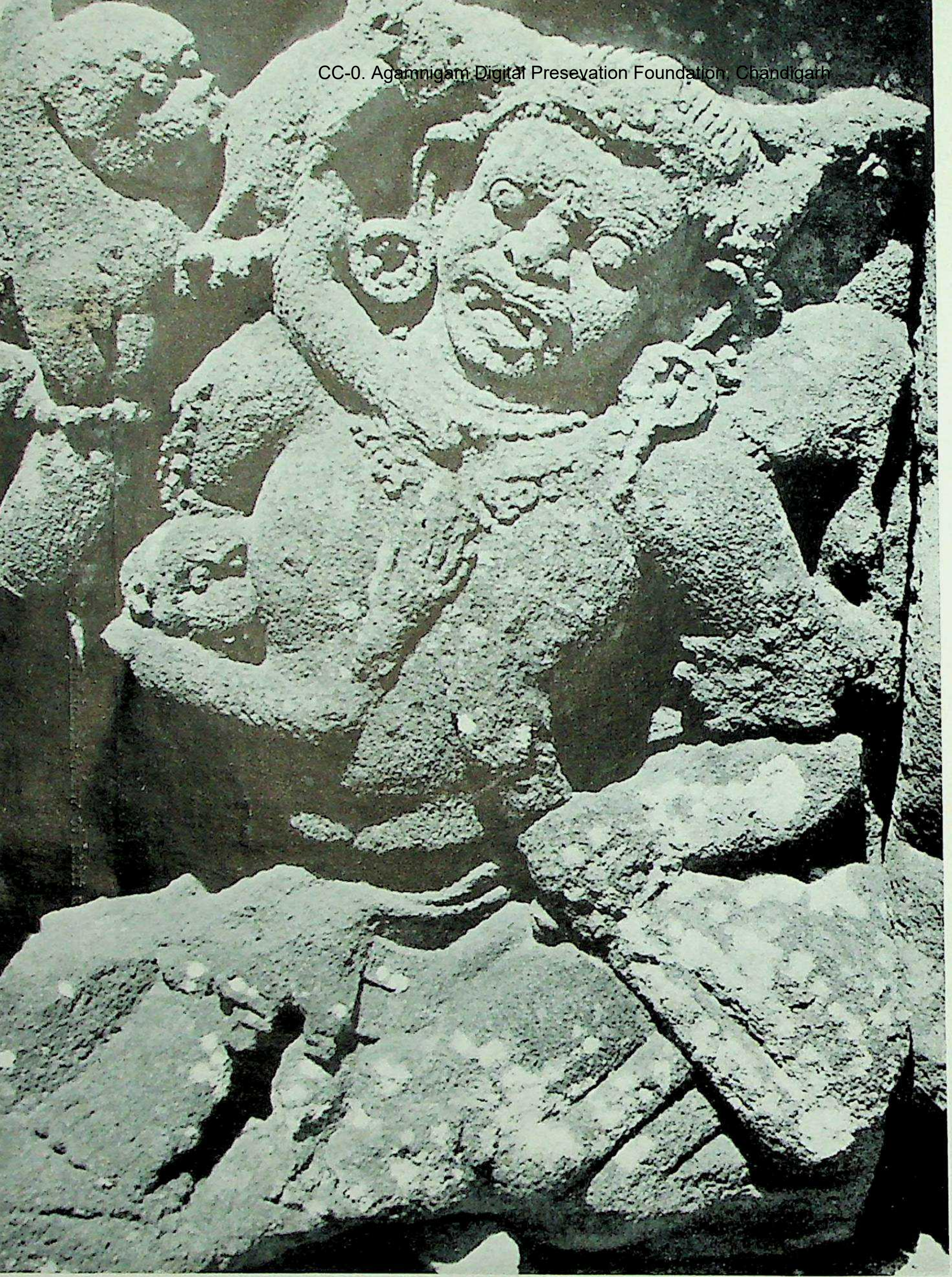
Kumbhakarna was silent for a moment. Then he said, "Brother, I warned you that you had done wrong to take away another's wife. You must now prepare to suffer for it. But while I am alive, no harm will come to you. Here, I go to end the foe." As Kumbhakarna strode out, the rakshasas showered their blessings on him. Cheering crowds lined the streets when he made his way to the battlefield.

When Kumbhakarna marched out of the city gates, his huge form filled the sky. He was met by a shower of arrows, but they just glanced away, blunted by the steel-like resistance of his body. Single-handed, he struck down the vanaras who dared to confront him. At this sight, a new wave of courage roused the rakshasas, who charged and widened the gap in the enemy ranks. Once more panic reduced the vanara army into a rabble running away for life.

Rama appeared again to rally his forces. Seeing him exposed to danger, Sugriva ran out to place himself between Rama and the enemy. But he was nearly trampled to death. "What a prize!" exclaimed Kumbhakarna as he gathered up the unconscious monkey. With a



31. The Rakshasas tried to wake Kumbhakarna by driving elephants and chariots over him.



32. When Kumbhakarna marched out of the city gates, his huge form filled the sky.

sudden movement he bit Kumbhakarna's ear and nose and jumped back to his camp. The vanara army had not yet recovered and was still in a state of confusion.

When Kumbhakarna rushed back after Sugriva, he was again faced with a stream of arrows from Rama, who was riding on Hanuman's shoulders. However, nothing could stop him. Undaunted he continued to advance, striking down the vanaras right and left.

As Kumbhakarna approached nearer, Rama drew out a special arrow and aimed it at his head. Like a flash of lightning it severed his head and carrying it far above, threw it into the streets of Lanka. The huge body rolled into the sea.

Victory was at last theirs. The battlefield resounded with the jubilant shouts of the vanara army.

When Ravana heard the news, he broke down completely. Alone in his palace and stricken with shame, he wondered whether Vibhishana had not been right after all.

# Chapter Sixteen

Indrajit entered, resplendent in his armour.

"Father, why do you grieve, when I am here?" he exclaimed. He looked so courageous and so full of spirit that Ravana was somewhat consoled.

"Go, my son, and restore my peace of mind by killing Rama," he said to him with renewed hope.

Indrajit rode into battle once more, striding across the mountainous bodies of dead rakshasa warriors. He saw Rama with his bow and arrow, moving about the field like a whirlwind.

Indrajit realized at once that direct attacks and ordinary weapons would be of no avail. So, he decided to use his secret weapons. Turning as if in retreat, he withdrew to a hiding place, and from there shot a "Brahma Arrow" into the battlefield. At once, everyone, including Rama and Lakshmana, fell down in a faint and became unconscious. Only Hanuman and the bear Jambavan escaped, as both had won from the gods immunity against the 'Brahma Arrow.' Alone, these two put their heads together to find a way of reviving their comrades.

Jambavan, grown grey with ancient lore, remembered that certain medicinal herbs, to be found only in the Himalayas, could bring back the warriors to consciousness. Hanuman immediately undertook to make this long and perilous journey. Without losing a moment, he swished his tail and was off like an arrow from Rama's own bow. His exciting adventures have been sung in many a ringing verse. Merely to hear them, says Valmiki, will give hope to the weak-hearted and restore the sick to health again.

With the army back in action, Rama decided that the battle should be carried into the city of Lanka.

Once more, Hanuman went forth to set fire to the city. Lanka burned again. People ran helter skelter and it looked as if this was the end. But Rama's army was still held back by the missiles which poured out from Indrajit's secret hiding place. There was wild panic when Indrajit was seen killing Sita and holding her head aloft. It was only when Vibhishana pointed out that this was a deception created by Indrajit that the vanaras regained confidence.

Now, Vibhishana knew everything about Indrajit's powers. Although he had moved about the battlefield helping Rama and Sugriva in many ways, he had not yet revealed Indrajit's secrets. Somehow he could not bring himself to this final act of betrayal. But he now felt it had to be done. Steeling his heart, he spoke to Rama and led Lakshmana to the spot where Indrajit was offering sacrifices to renew his powers. Forewarned of Indrajit's secrets, Lakshmana prepared for battle with the demon prince, carefully recalling all the secrets taught to him by Viswamitra.

When Indrajit saw Vibhishana on the side of Lakshmana, he cried out more in sorrow than in anger: "You are my uncle and yet you help the enemy. Can there be a greater traitor than you? No wonder father drove you away. Prepare now for your death," he exclaimed.

But, Viswamitra's lessons proved more valuable than Indrajit's sacrifices. Fighting bravely to the last, Indrajit fell to the Indra Arrow of Lakshmana.

There was boundless rejoicing in the vanara camp, at the conquest of the unconquerable.

In the rakshasa camp, grief and sorrow were as boundless. Mad with the despair of defeat, Ravana rushed out to kill Sita, but his ministers restrained him. Soon, it dawned upon him that the root of his trouble was not Sita but his own greed and vanity. Dark forebodings of the future haunted him. But he braced himself to do his duty like the conquering hero he had been, even if it was only to meet his fate. Gathering his trusted followers, he again rode out to confront Rama.

Once in battle, he became himself again. He remembered the boon of Brahma. How could a mere man kill him? He drew his bow with hope.

Arrows darted out with lightning speed from the bows of both warriors. But so skilful were they that few of the arrows could find their mark; most merely stopped each other. The devas who watched from above saw a veritable network of arrows. Vibhishana was nearly killed. Lakshmana was again wounded.

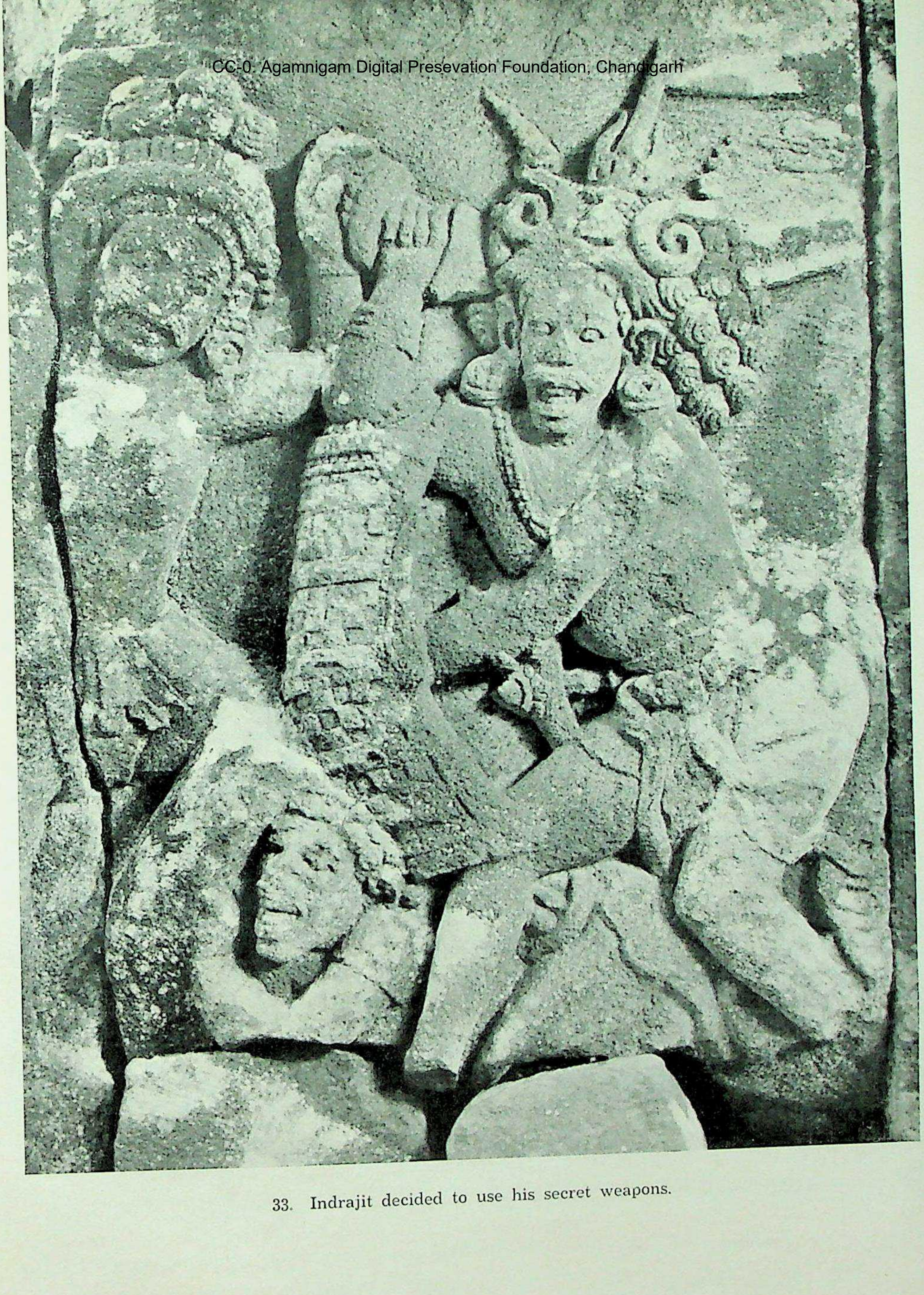
Rama mounted on a chariot which the great Indra himself sent. So far he had been fighting on Hanuman's back. Great as was his skill and sure his aim, Ravana could not stop all Rama's arrows. Soon his heads began to fall one by one. But thanks to the boon of Brahma, new heads came up in their places. Rama was for a moment stunned by this miracle. Thinking of Viswamitra again he drew a Brahma

Arrow and aimed it at Ravana's heart. As it struck him, Ravana's bow slipped from his hands and he rolled down dead. The terror of the three worlds at last went to his eternal sleep.

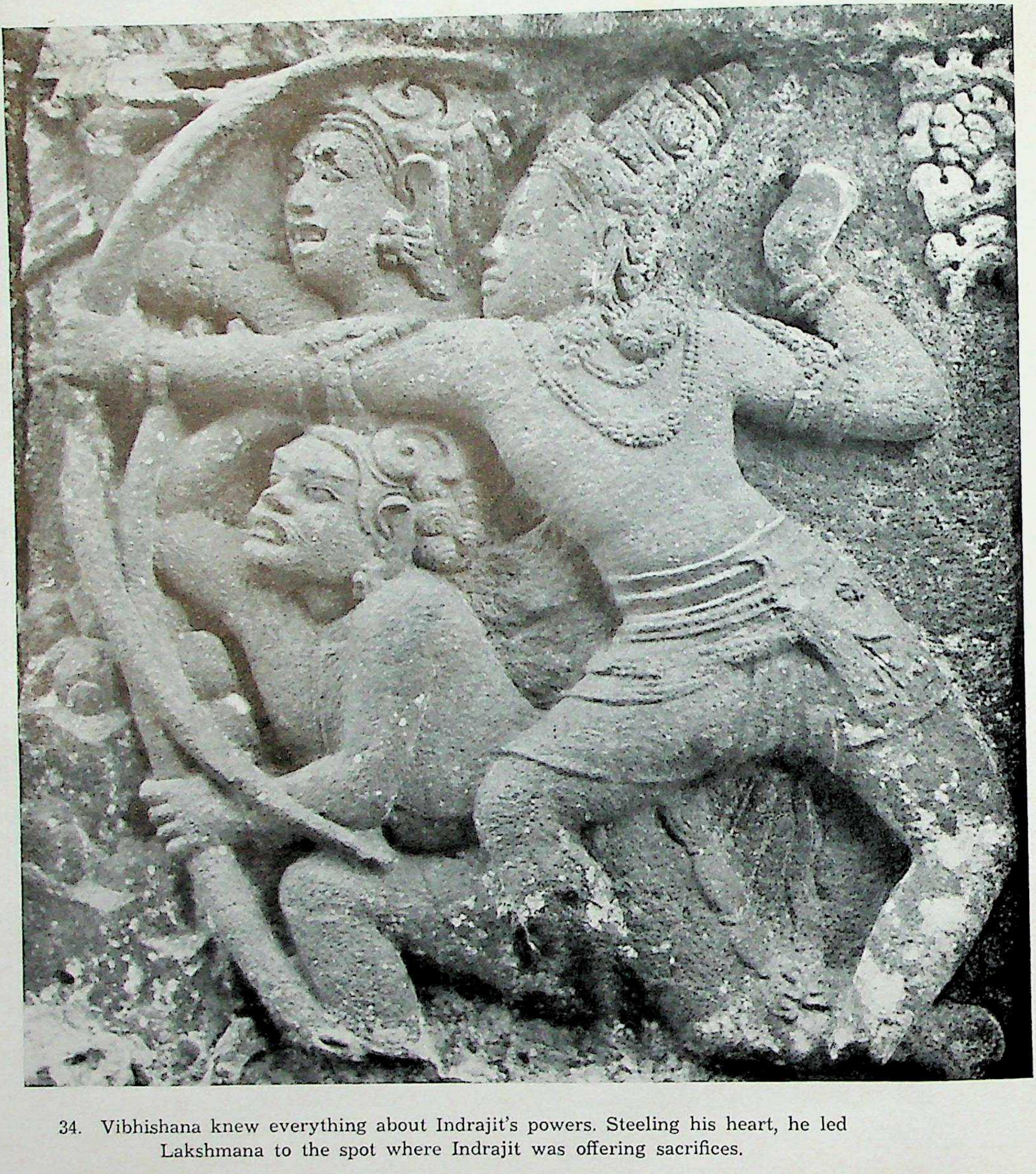
Ravana's queens ran out into the battlefield and wept bitterly over his body. Vibhishana too added his tears to theirs.

There was now nothing to stop the vanaras, who entered Lanka in triumph with Lakshmana and Sugriva at their head. Vibhishana was crowned king of Lanka.

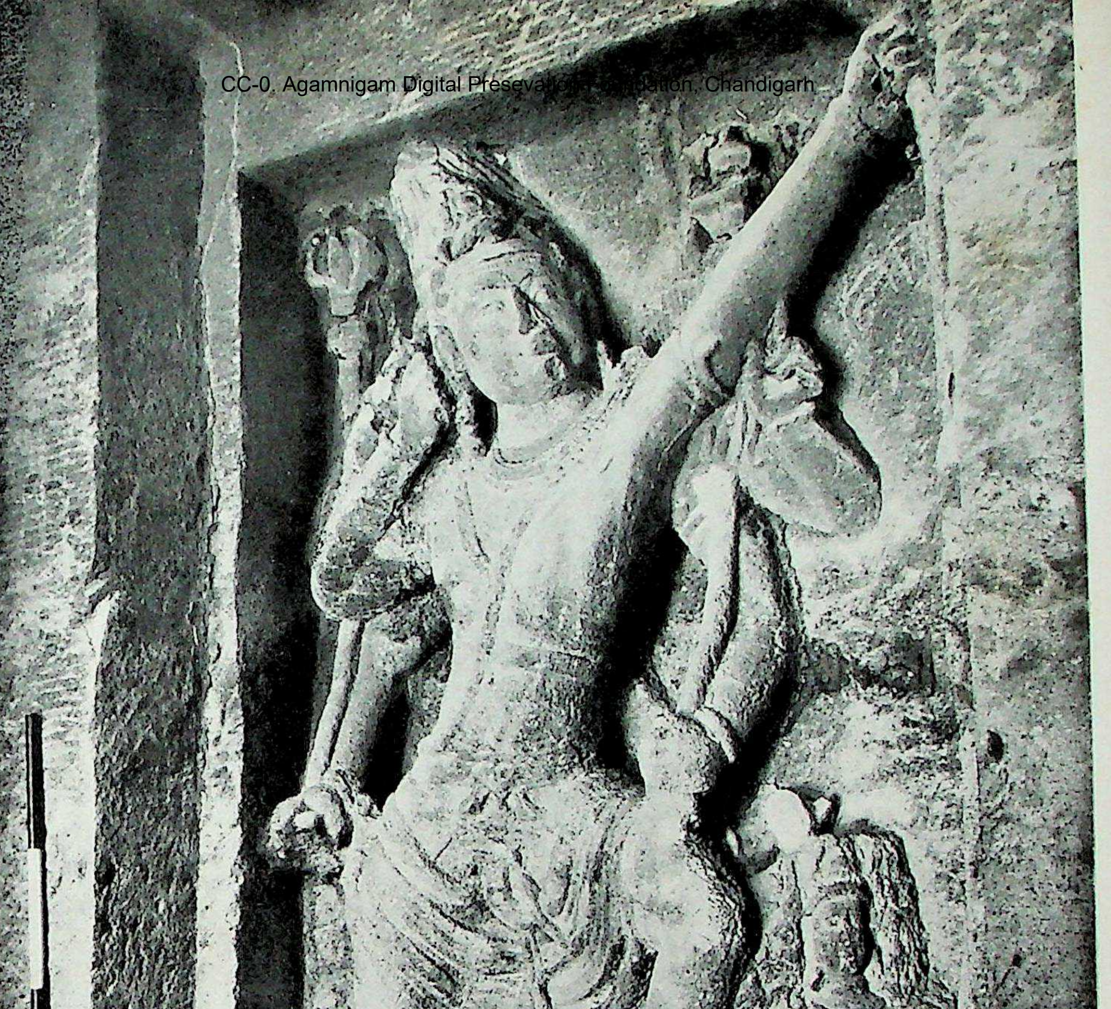
Rama stayed alone in the camp. True to his promise, even in this hour of triumph, he refused to enter any town until his fourteen years of exile were over.



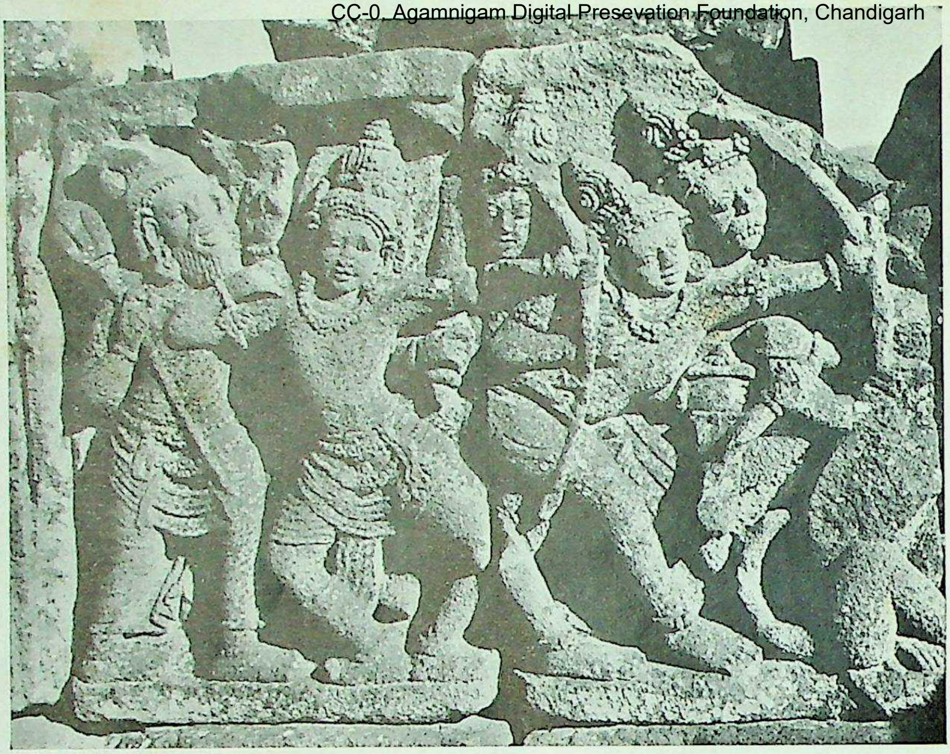
33. Indrajit decided to use his secret weapons.



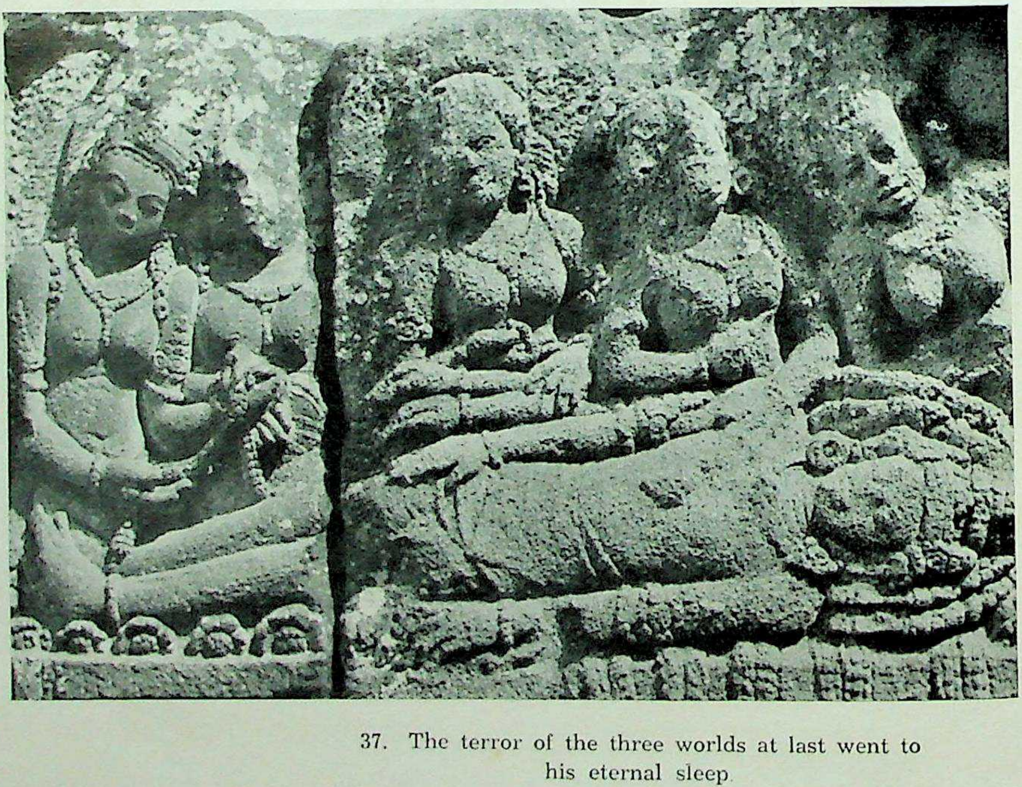
34. Vibhishana knew everything about Indrajit's powers. Steeling his heart, he led Lakshmana to the spot where Indrajit was offering sacrifices.



35. The arrows darted with lightning speed from Rama's bow.



36. Thinking of Viswamitra, Rama drew a 'Brahma Arrow' and aimed it at Ravana's heart.



37. The terror of the three worlds at last went to his eternal sleep.

## Chapter Seventeen

The clamour of victory reached Sita's ears as she brooded in her grove. She knew that Rama had won the battle.

Just then Hanuman rushed to her presence. "Rama has won!" he cried to her excitedly.

Sita could not speak for joy. Her heart beat wildly and her eyes filled with tears. Hanuman waited in silence. Then he said, "Dear lady, why don't you say something?"

"Dear Hanuman, always my messenger of good tidings, how can I thank you? Because of your strength you crossed over to Lanka. By your prowess you frightened the rakshasas. By your will-power you brought my two heroes here and now you stand before me giving me the great news. Oh, dear friend, who can equal you in goodness in all the wide world?"

Hanuman looked at her tear-stained face and recalled all that she had suffered. Suddenly his glance fell on the ugly rakshasis around her. He grew fierce. "Let me kill them for what they have done to you," he begged.

Sita shook her head. "Why should they suffer for the faults of their king? They did nothing but obey orders. They were terrified of Ravana," said the princess in great compassion.

Hanuman bowed his head.

"Go, my dear friend, and tell Rama that I am longing to meet him," said Sita. Hanuman returned with her message to the prince of Ayodhya. But no welcoming smile greeted him. Rama's face wore a dark look. He was brooding deeply. As if shaking off a bad dream, he stirred himself and spoke to Vibhishana.

"Bring Sita here to me after she has bathed and changed," he ordered his friend.

Vibhishana went to the garden of Asoka and gave Sita Rama's message. "I would prefer to go as I am," remarked the princess.

"Those were Rama's orders," said Vibhishana shortly and ordered Sita's bath.

Sita came dressed in beauteous splendour. At the sight of so much loveliness the monkeys ran hither and thither trying to get more glimpses of her. Their chieftains tried to restrain them.

"Do not stop them. Let them see Sita. These monkeys are my friends. They fought the battle for me," cried Rama angrily.

There was an uncomfortable silence. What had gone wrong? Rama looked unusually dark with anger. Sita got out of the palanquin in which she was riding and walked up to Rama.

But no welcome light shone in his eyes. She looked up in doubt at Rama's knitted brow. Fear began to gnaw at her heart.

"Daughter of Janaka," said Rama in heavy tones. "I have won the war and freed you from Ravana, but I cannot take you back as my wife. You have lived too long in Ravana's palace. One of my friends here will look after you. Choose."

Sita was stunned by these cold and cruel words. Was it for this that she had suffered agonies for a whole year? It could not be. Drawing herself up bravely, she exclaimed. "What are you saying, my prince? Your words are those of a common man blinded by suspicion. They are unworthy of my great Rama. Have you spoken or am I dreaming?"

"Sita, I did not fight to get you back. I fought to keep the honour of the house of Ikshvaku. My duty is now done. You may go your way."

Sparks of anger kindled Sita's eyes for a moment. She lost her fear. The calm of supreme courage lit up her face. "Is that so, my lord? Very well, then. I shall indeed go my way." Then, turning to Lakshmana she ordered. "Prepare a pyre of wood and light it that I may enter the fire."

With bent head and shaking hands, Lakshmana did as he was told. As he arranged the pyre he looked up at his brother's face, but Rama gave no sign. He looked hard, cold and relentless. Everyone stared in silent wonder at this new aspect of Rama.

Lakshmana lit the fire.

Standing before the burning wood, Sita prayed to the fire god Agni and threw herself into the flames.

The choked silence around the flames was broken by a great miracle. The god Agni rose from the fire holding Sita aloft in his arms.

"I have brought back Sita to you. She is as true as the light in the fire. Her love for you is unblemished."

With these words Agni offered Sita to Rama. Rama was transformed. He received Sita tenderly into his arms. "Do not be angry, my dear. You must have known that I did this only to show the world what you really are," he whispered.

Sita's heart was at last at rest. She knew of course that her Rama had only meant to teach the world a lesson and not her.

In Lanka, the lamps were lit once more. Vibhishana was to rule and the people could now live without fear of tyranny, in utter peace and happiness.

"Vibhishana, you shall rule for hundreds of years and your fame shall spread all over the world," said Rama, blessing his friend in a voice of gratitude.

The fourteen years of Rama's exile were now over and he decided to go back to Ayodhya. Vibhishana brought forth Ravana's flying chariot, known as the Pushpaka. Sugriva, Vibhishana, Hanuman and some of the vanara chiefs went with Rama.

Rama, Sita and Lakshmana flew swiftly over the forest in the Pushpaka. As they went, Rama recounted to Sita all that had happened and how he had gone from place to place looking for her. "Look, down there is the bridge that the monkeys built with Nila's help; and yonder on your left is the hill on which I first met Hanuman. You remember Jatayu, Sita? This is where I found him on the point of death. And that is the dale in which I killed the fateful golden deer," said Rama, his voice growing soft at the thought of all that they had suffered.

As they approached Ayodhya, a sudden doubt assailed Rama. He frowned and calling Hanuman said to him, "Bharata might have got used to being a king and may not like to have me back. Go ahead quickly and find out how he feels, before I reach Ayodhya."

That day Bharata woke up in doubt. It was exactly fourteen years since Rama had gone. The exile was over. All these years he had lived in patience, but now he could not bear to wait even a minute. Was Rama going to keep his promise? Since he left Chitrakuta he had had no news of him. Had all his penance been in vain? He felt he could not live any longer. He decided to light a fire and jump into it. Of what use was life without Rama?

Just then Hanuman came into view. He saw the brother of Rama, pale and thin, sick with waiting, about to kill himself. He descended quickly and gave him the good news.

Bharata could hardly believe his ears. At the thought of meeting his beloved Rama, he was faint with joy. His knees trembled and his hands shook. Hanuman watched him in wonder. "Here is someone who loves Rama more than I do. How could Rama doubt him?" he said to himself as he looked at Bharata clad in a dress of bark.

The news of Rama's return roused Ayodhya from the dead torpor of fourteen years. "Rama is coming," they shouted to each other as they decorated the town with festoons. Sweet music filled the air. Flowers were strewn on the streets and lights shone in the houses. Ayodhya was gay once more. The streets rang with laughter and song.

The city expectantly watched the sky for the Pushpaka. When it appeared out of the clouds, Rama was seen high up in the sky shining like the rising sun. Cheers went up to greet him. The people of Ayodhya gave free vent to their joy.

Bharata held his hands high. "Rama, Rama!" His lips moved but no sound came from his throat.

As the Pushpaka landed, Bharata leapt into the chariot and embraced Rama. But he still could not speak; he was choked with joy.

Hanuman looked at Rama as if to say, "See how right I was." He had given a true account of Bharata in the garb of an exile, waiting for Rama at Nandigrama. Rama had smiled at his story, as if to say he knew his Bharata.

Was it just to show him that he had others who loved him as much that Rama sent him to Bharata? the monkey wondered.

Kausalya and the other queens now came to greet Rama. The meeting of the royal family was a touching scene. Slowly, as Bharata recovered speech, he gave Rama an account of his regency. He begged Rama to forgive him for all his shortcomings and implored him to take charge of the kingdom. Rama was deeply touched by his brother's devotion and nobility.

Soon Rama was crowned king of Ayodhya amidst great splendour and joyful festivities. Throughout, the faithful Hanuman waited on Rama and Sita. Shyly rising from the throne, Sita presented Hanuman with a lovely pearl necklace. What more could that hero want, than the tender regard which Sita gave him?

There followed that glorious period of Rama's reign, which has become celebrated throughout India as 'Rama Rajya.' Rama was indeed an ideal king, wise, just and merciful. He established what we now know as the 'rule of law.' Every one, from the highest to the humblest, cheerfully did his duty, under the guidance of the king and the rishis who advised him.

Thus, he set a supreme example. And so grew the legend that Rama was an incarnation of God, come down to earth to protect the good, punish the evil, and establish the reign of peace and justice.

Can there be a man like Rama again? or a brother like Bharata or Lakshmana? or a friend, as faithful as Sugriva or Hanuman?

The poet Valmiki has presented us with these ideal characters, flawless in virtue, almost divine in perfection. Perhaps they are but ideals; ideals to emulate, but like all ideals, forever receding.

# Notes on the Illustrations

PLATES: FRONTISPIECE, 6, 10, 18, 19, 20, 21, 24, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 36 AND 37.

*Prambanan*—12 miles from Jogjakarta in the island of Java in Indonesia—is well known for its group of Hindu temples belonging to the 9th century A.D. Beginning as early as the 1st century B.C. there were continued immigrations from South India to Indonesia, and the two great Hindu epics—the Ramayana and the Mahabharata—have been known there since those times. The portrayal of these epic themes in Indonesian temples is evidence of a living contact between the two countries. The famous Siva temple in Prambanan has a series of friezes from the Ramayana, several of which have been used to illustrate this book.

PLATES: 5, 13 AND 14.

*Amaravati*. The Buddhist remains of Amaravati, in the Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh, belong to the period between the 2nd century B.C. and the 2nd century A.D. The modern town of Amaravati was once the beautiful provincial capital of the Satavahana kings and tradition connects it with Nagarjuna, a Buddhist monk and writer. A stupa is a funeral mound erected to enshrine the relics of Buddhist saints, and the Great Stupa of Amaravati, which was unearthed in the 19th century, is believed to have been one of the finest monuments of Buddhist culture. A touching expression of faith and devotion is characteristic of the group scenes in Amaravati sculpture.

PLATES: 1, 11 AND 16.

*Sanchi* is situated near Bhopal in Madhya Pradesh. The Emperor Ashoka is said to have begun the building of the famous Buddhist monuments of Sanchi in the 3rd century B.C. The sculpture depicts vividly the life of the age, and the group scenes are full of a bustling, cheerful activity. The Great Stupa with its beautiful carvings and brackets is a truly remarkable structure.

PLATES: 3, 4, 15 AND 17.

*Nagarjunakonda* is situated on the river Krishna in the Guntur District of Andhra Pradesh. Excavations on the ancient site have brought to light Buddhist monuments of the 2nd and 3rd century A.D. The Ikshvakus, who ruled this kingdom during this period, followed the art tradition of their Buddhist predecessors, the Satavahanas. Though the Ikshvakus were Hindus, their queens were devout Buddhists and inspired the beautiful structures of Nagarjunakonda. As at Amaravati, the composition of group scenes is excellent and reveals both fineness and depth of perception.

### PLATES: 2, 8, 9 AND 23.

*Hampi* on the banks of the river Tungabhadra in the Bellary District of Mysore State was once the capital of the Vijayanagara Empire (14th century —16th century A.D.). Today, the ruins of this ancient and beautiful city, extend over an area of about 10 square miles. The Vijayanagara kings were connoisseurs of art and built a city of magnificent palaces and temples. Their fabulous wealth was a byword. The story goes that in the king's treasury were wells filled with molten gold.

### PLATES: 25, 27 AND 35.

*Ellora* is about 16 miles from Aurangabad in Maharashtra. The caves of Ellora date from the 5th century A.D. but the best-known ones, including the famous rock-cut temple of Kailasa, belong to the Rashtrakuta period (8th century A.D.). The Rashtrakutas adhered to the Gupta tradition which is one of the finest in Hindu art. A strength which lends power and beauty to the figures, is an outstanding feature of the sculptures of Ellora.

### PLATE: 12.

This sculpture portraying the wedding of Siva and Parvati, belongs to the Gurjara Pratihara period of the 9th century. King Bhoja of Kanauj, the ruler of this dynasty during that period, was a patron of art and learning. The sculptures of this school reveal the influence of the Hindu art of the Guptas.

### PLATES: 7 AND 22.

*Rajasthani Painting*: Several scenes from the Ramayana have been depicted in the Rajasthani paintings of the 18th century. This Rajasthani school of painting has its own form and conventions. The style is serene and poised and the colouring has a soft beauty reminiscent of lyrical poetry.

# The Story of Rama

The Ramayana, the great Sanskrit epic of ancient India—composed many centuries ago by the sage and poet Valmiki—is still recited in India's cities and villages to the delight of young and old. Valmiki taught his pupils to sing its verses and they in turn taught others. Thus for generations the Ramayana lived in the memories of men and women, until it was written down . . . .

In this book, beautifully illustrated with photographs of sculptures, Mrs. Bhoothalingam narrates with fascinating simplicity the story of Rama—the hero of the epic who suffered much to fight and destroy evil. Rama's adventures; his long exile; his love for his wife Sita, who was carried away by Ravana, the wicked ruler of Lanka; the heroic battle with Ravana; and his final victory—all these are retold with all the exuberance that inspired the original legend of long ago.

Of the thirty-seven illustrations of sculptures included in the book, some are directly related to the Ramayana; others are symbolic in character. They have been taken from Hindu and Buddhist temples in India and South-East Asia and will constitute an ideal introduction for young people to India's sculptural heritage.

Mrs. Mathuram Bhoothalingam is well-known to Tamil readers under the penname KRITHIKA. Her published works are: *Ramayana for Children* (in German) 1957; *Puhai Naduvil* (a Tamil novel) 1953; *Manathile Oru Maru* (a collection of plays in Tamil) 1960; and *Satyameva* (a satire in Tamil) 1961.

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